Riders of B. E. R. K.

by harrypanther

Summary

Modern AU. Final Year student Astrid Hofferson finds a young man in an alley, seriously ill, on the run and scared. Helping him, she finds herself suddenly part of a mysterious organisation where humans and mythical dragons are working together. But others want the valuable beasts for their own... Modern AU

Notes

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I heard the footsteps first, the uneven sounds of a limp. It sounded far enough away to make a break if the owner came close. Then I hefted my backpack on my shoulders: who was I kidding? No one hanging around here in the dark could have any benign intent. And I was alone in the dark winter evening on my way back to my apartment.

I tensed, my fists balling. It was reasonably well lit between the converted warehouses at the old docks but most of the units weren't taken yet: it was what they call an 'up and coming' area. But that means not so many people to come if I screamed blue murder. And the few alleys were deep in darkness and sinister—even for someone with my combat skills and solid martial arts training.

The limp came closer and it sounded bad. The owner was really struggling, the irregularity of the steps striking. Part of me was curious: what had caused the limp? My mind automatically flicked down the possibilities and I had to blink to pull myself back to the present: there were more important things to consider. I jumped back and peered into the shadowed passage. There was someone there, a single figure moving unsteadily. Great. A drunk or a junkie: just what I need! Not that I had much worth mugging on me: I had come from my shift via the gym and had only my purse with a couple of low-limit cards and a handful of coins for a coffee. And I hardly looked affluent: I was sweaty and dishevelled in grey sweat pants, sky blue hoodie and trainers. Not a designer label or top end accessory in sight! I had headed home for my shower and wished now I had taken it there—maybe I could have missed this person.

He stumbled forward, almost into the light and I could make him out. Tall and skinny were the first impressions, with messy brown or dark auburn hair and a very lopsided gait. He saw me and paused, then recoiled a step: he seemed alarmed to see me. I felt a little more confident and took a pace towards him. He backed off another pace and I could see his face in a chink of light: he was young, my age I guess and he looked...scared? I came closer.

"Who are you?" I asked him bluntly. "What are you doing here?" He cringed away.

"N-nothing," he murmured and his voice was definitely scared. He backed off and his left leg gave way, pitching him sideways into the wall. It was almost in slow motion, his lanky shape jerking sideways, his head hitting the wall with a dull thud, his skinny shape folding and sliding down to land in a crumpled heap on the floor. He gave a groan that deteriorated into a harsh cough. I turned and backed away. Definitely a junkie, I thought as I turned towards my apartment. I would call the security patrol and they could pick him up and move him along—or whatever they did to vagrants. And then he coughed again.

I stopped, my shoulders tensing. This was wrong. This man had fallen, hit his head and seemed to have a nasty cough. Whether he had an alcohol or substance misuse problem, I owed him at least a check to make sure he hadn't done himself some serious harm—a concussion or worse—when he collapsed. With a sigh, I turned round and walked back towards him.

He was blinking, his expression puzzled, as if he couldn't recall how he ended on the ground. I approached slowly because I still wasn't sure if he would try to do me any harm. He could be concussed, withdrawing, having the DTs...anything. He just tried to make himself look smaller and he looked scared to death. I could see him clearly now and his hair was a very dark auburn, his face was pale with a little scattering of freckles over the skin and bright emerald eyes. Too bright, in fact. His skin was flushed over the cheeks and he looked unwell and was breathing fast. I crouched down.
"I don't mean you any harm," I said gently. He swallowed: his lips were dry and his breaths, close to, sounded harsh. "You hit your head. Are you okay?" He frowned and gently lifted a hand to the back of his head.

"Ow," he murmured. He blinked again, almost in slow motion. He still looked as if he might be on drugs, but his eyes focussed briefly on me. "'m fine," he murmured. His voice was clear and pleasant and he was definitely my age. He was really skinny, his cheek bones hard against his skin, the faint stubble on the angular line of his jaw emphasising his lack of substance. Then he coughed again, doubling up and hacking as of he'd cough up both lungs. I leaned forward and winced. Probably got TB as well, I thought and laid a gentle hand on his. His skin was dry and scorching hot. He looked up, alarmed. "Please," he rasped. And he sounded ghastly as well.

"You're really sick," I told him softly. "You have a fever and probably a chest infection. And a horrible limp..." He attempted a lopsided smile.

"Yeah, that's a long story," he muttered roughly.

"You need medical help!" I urged him. His eyes popped wide open and he recoiled, his face filled with fear.

"No! No doctors. No hospitals. No authorities!" he said with surprising firmness. I was mildly offended but rose smoothly.

"Do you have somewhere to go?" I asked coolly. He coughed again then shook his head.

"I'm fine," he murmured, his mouth tightening with stubbornness. I turned and then stared back at him. He hadn't moved, still breathing fast and harshly, the cough bubbling at the back of his throat. I sighed. It was already approaching freezing and I knew he would die if I left him out here.

"You could come with me," I suggested, mentally kicking myself for being an idiot as soon as the words left my lips. "At least have some aspirin, a warm drink and a rest." He glanced up and his brilliant green eyes brightened.

"A warm drink sounds like a great idea," he admitted roughly and he tried to get to his feet. And then I saw it: his left foot wasn't there, replaced by some metal contraption that looked like the bottom end of one of those high tech prostheses you see on Paralympic athletes. The guy only had one leg: that explained the limp. He tried to get to his feet but as soon as he tried to put weight on the metal leg, he groaned and it collapsed. The grimace on his face was painful to watch. So I leaned forward and offered a hand.

"Let me help," I offered and he looked up, as if seeing me for the first time. He nodded and gave a slight smile.

"Thanks," he murmured and I felt the sudden pressure of his left hand on my shoulder. He rose to his feet but the left leg just wasn't able to carry any weight. I lent him my shoulder and he leaned heavily on me as we made our precarious way to the door of my block. His hand was scorching and I noticed the long fingers, carefully trying not to dig into my shoulder. He was tall but he must weigh next to nothing because I supported him easily. I know I'm strong—all the training will do that—but I was surprised how easily I dragged him along. I punched in my code and the automated door opened. We manoeuvred in and I called the lift.

"You're not a rapist or mugger are you?" I asked him lightly. His head dipped and I thought he would collapse again but he gave a low, hoarse chuckle.
"No, Milady," he murmured. "You're safe from me." The doors opened and we limped in. Then I stabbed the '2' button to get to my home. The doors closed.

He was tense-I could tell that. He felt vulnerable and sick and probably embarrassed. His hair was really messy, a choppy style that had it shaggy around his head. His pale skin with the flushed cheeks was close to mine, his patched leather jacket and stained black jeans had seen better days and he was trembling. I wondered what his story was-and hoped I hadn't made a huge mistake.

"I'm Astrid," I said by way of greeting. He winced.

"My name is Hiccup," he said in a vaguely embarrassed tone.

Weird.

"Oh…that's…interesting…" I managed. He sighed.

"Oh, that's not the worst of it," he muttered. "It means the runt of the litter-a mistake." He shrugged and managed to gesture to his lanky shape. "Great, huh?" I smile.

"At least you don't have to worry about any mistaken identity," I reminded him. "And as for identity fraud…" He managed a small smile at my attempt at humour.

"Yeah, I'm always being mistaken for all those other Hiccups…" he managed before another bout of coughing doubled him over and I could feel the heaving gasps through his body. He staggered and I had to struggle as the lift opened and I reached my door. I fumbled the key and the door opened. We staggered in and I kicked the door closed behind me, fumbling at the lights and turning the deadlock.

Hiccup was blinking and looking disorientated. He was starting to shiver and I guessed his temperature was climbing. I stared into his anxious face and he ghosted a small smile.

"Thanks," he said softly as he fainted and collapsed onto my floor.
What the hell happened to this guy?

I stared at the unconscious shape at my feet and sighed. I had a mysterious stranger passed out on my floor. He could well be a junkie or an alcoholic and he certainly wasn't well. He had given me a preposterous name and little else.

He was lying sprawled uncomfortably on my floor, his flushed face relaxed. He was breathing harshly, he had been inexplicably scared stiff about being taken to a hospital and had a horrible limp on his prosthetic leg.

And he was kind of cute.

I blinked and mentally kicked myself. Bad girl, Astrid! The last observation was true but currently moot: he was unconscious and needed help. So I dropped my backpack by the door and turned back, kneeling by him and gently putting him in the recovery position. He remained limp and unconscious and I sighed. I couldn't leave him here on the floor.

I glanced up. My apartment was created from the converted warehouses by the old docks into a 'stylish loft style dwelling'. Which translates as large open plan living space with sitting room, living room, dining room, study and kitchen all mixed into one and two separate bedrooms and a bathroom. It had been undecorated when I bought it and I had gone through it in pale blues, white and a hint of gold and it was furnished functionally. It was completely paid for by the money from my Gran's house when she died. And I lived here alone.

I opened the spare bedroom. Both bedrooms had doubles in and I kept the spare room ever ready in defiance that someday, my friends would want to come to stay. They had, earlier this year, after they graduated and I entered final year but over the months we kind of drifted apart. I had too much on-training, shifts, lectures, projects while they had real lives out there. I sighed. At least someone would benefit from the room. It was functional as well-plain blue duvet and sheets, white and gold lamp, canvas wardrobe and white painted chest of drawers. I turned back to my guest.

Hiccup showed no sign of waking, breathing heavily. I leaned down, grabbed him under the arms and dragged him towards the spare room. He still weighed surprisingly little despite being a dead weight and I winced at the scrape of the metal foot over my polished floor. I stopped as we entered the room and made sure he was comfortable on the seagrass matting before I straightened up and pulled the covers back. And then I stared at my guest. He was flushed with a high temperature: the last thing he needed was going to bed fully clothed. I huffed: I would have to undress him.

I'm not a prude: far from it. I can honestly say I have seen every part of the human body-male and female-and none of them actually bother me. But this felt different because this was a stranger in my own apartment. I leaned down and began to pull off his battered leather jacket. He was lanky and awkward to manoeuvre and I wished I had someone to help me. Eventually, I managed to drag the jacket off and tossed it onto the small chair in the corner. He was wearing a green check shirt underneath and that was easier to remove. Then a stained whitish T-shirt which also came off, revealing his lean torso. I could see all his ribs and a nasty purple-green bruise over the right side of his chest. That looked sore.

I was tempted to stop at this point but I'm nothing if not a perfectionist and I don't quit halfway through a job. So I dropped to my knees and unlaced his boot. It was battered and had definitely seen better days. I levered it off and dropped it to one side, then the sock as well. Then I crawled to his waist. Taking a strange guy's pants off was something I have to admit was a new experience for me but I knew he needed to cool down. I rolled my eyes and unbuckled the belt and then
unfastened his jeans. Fortunately, he had underwear on. I grabbed the denim and hauled the jeans down over his narrow hips, down his legs and then stopped at the prosthesis.

I glanced up. He was still out and I grumbled under my breath. At least he could have the decency to wake up and help me with the damned thing! In response to my inspection, he gave another horrible, hacking cough. Spurred on, I shimmied the jeans over the prosthesis and tossed them onto his chair, then looked at my guest. Lanky, skinny, a bit battered and flushed with fever, he lay under my gaze before I hefted him up onto the bed and nudged him into position. I glanced him over.

His face was relaxed and flushed and his eyes remained closed. His auburn mop stuck crazily out like a dandelion clock and there was a faint bruise on his right cheek. His neck was flung back, slender and pale and he swallowed automatically then coughed again. The bruise on his chest probably overlay cracked ribs and I gently drifted my fingers over the wounds, feeling the swelling of breaks. Ouch. His shoulders were broader than expected from the rest of his physique and he was lean and wiry. Lanky arms with light musculature and numerous old burns were relaxed, his long, deft fingers half-curled against the sheet. I was pleased to note he doesn't seem to have any track marks. His stomach was flat and his skin was pale with a faint dusting of freckles. I could see his prominent hip-bones and long, lean legs. His left ended about six inches below the knee with the metal prosthetic, strapped on over a sock. I sighed, then unstrapped the prosthesis and then pulled the sock off.

The stump was badly scarred, not a precise surgical amputation. This had to be traumatic and the wounds were still red and proud: it was a recent injury. I stole a glance at this young man, around my age, and wondered what had happened to him. And I could see that the skin and the whole stump was flaring scarlet with tendrils of red crawling up the skin towards the knee. I gently touched the skin: even hotter than the rest of him. I recognised it: Cellulitis. Infection.

I pulled the sheet up over him to the waist, offering him a modicum of dignity before I walked to the bathroom. The cabinet was well-stocked and I gathered what I needed and then went back to see him. I also grabbed a glass and some water. Then I returned to the spare room. He was still breathing hard and I stared at him, then quietly get out the thermometer. I have one of those ear ones and I cautiously took his temperature. I glanced at it and repeated twice. 40.4 degrees. Shit. He was really sick and should be in hospital but he had refused. I could call an ambulance while he was unconscious but that would be a betrayal of his wishes and he had looked so scared at the thought. But keeping him here would be amazingly stupid. He could die. And I could lose my license before I even get it. But I dug in the medicine box and fished out the antibiotics from my elective. He needed them far more than I did. Then I gently but persistently shook him and slowly, with another pained cough, his eyes fluttered wearily open.

The emerald depths were disorientated and he looked momentarily lost but then I came into view and smiled at him. He recoiled for a moment, his eyes flashing with fear before recognition arrived and then he mastered himself. He managed a wan smile.

"Hi," he rasped. "I…erm…I…sorry…” He looked self-conscious and his cheeks flushed even more. Then he realised he was almost naked and snatched the sheet, dragging it right up to his chin. He squeaked in embarrassment. "Aargh! Did-did you…?"

"You've got a fever," I explained to him. "I needed to cool you down. You were really hot…” He gave a shrug and warily gestured to his sheet-covered shape.

"Get it all the time," he muttered dryly. I smiled at his attempt at self-deprecating humour and sigh.
"We need to get your fever down urgently. You've got a chest infection and an infection in your stump," I told him briskly. His eyes widened and he threw the sheet down, suddenly focussed, then lifted his leg up to see the redness and the lines that crawl up his skin.

"Shit," he muttered softly and then dropped his leg back onto the bed. "Not again." I frowned.

"This has happened before?" He shrugged and managed a nod.

"The accident wasn't pretty and I had a pretty bad infection following," he admitted. "And a couple since. I guess that's why it gave way…" He closed his eyes. I got the impression he was exhausted.

"I've got antibiotics. Broad spectrum. Penicillin. They should help," I offered gently. "And aspirin to take the fever down." He opened his eyes again and looked perplexed.

"You-you'd do that…for me?" he asked, surprised. I nodded then leaned forward.

"Open wide," I said in my best nurse voice and popped the aspirin in. He dutifully swallowed with a sip of water, then took the the antibiotics. Then I fed him the rest of the glass. He lay back, exhausted and I neatly pulled the sheet up to his chest. He ghosted me a small smile, his eyes suddenly flooded with gratitude. I felt something melt in my chest and I flashed a small smile back.

"Get some rest," I assured him. "I'll be next door." I switched off the main light, leaving the lamp on as his eyes closed and he rapidly sank into sleep.

I thoughtfully walked back to the bathroom and tidied up. There was something about him that didn't seem threatening. And I realised: it was the lack of self-confidence, the lack of the cocky, alpha male persona that I run into every day at work. Hiccup seemed nervous, shy and self-deprecating…all of which seemed to be appealing to me like mad. I rolled my eyes and clicked the shower on. While the water warmed, I shucked off my sweaty gym things and stepped into the water.

For a long moment, I closed my eyes and allowed the water the sluice away the sweat and uncertainty. I'm self-sufficient-I've had to be. Parents died while I was in High School and I went to live with Gran-and she passed two years ago, while I was in University, on a training weekend. I spoke to her before I went and she seemed fine: when I got back from the mountains, I was alone in the world. I knew what I wanted and had secured the sponsorship and was gaining good grades but it all seemed pointless as I stood by her grave and said my goodbyes. And then, remembering her gentle touch, her warm smile and her unfailing words of support and encouragement that I could do exactly what I wanted to do, I turned my face back to the world and continued my pursuit of my dreams, carrying the memories of my family with me.

Angrily, I swiped the tears from my face-the water conveniently washed them away-and turned back to my shower. I scrubbed my body and washed my blonde hair, digging my fingers into my scalp to remove the prickle of sweat. Once I was happy I was clean, I flipped the water off and stepped out, wrapping myself in a huge blue towel and then dried my hair. Automatically, I braided it and flipped the braid over a shoulder, then walked to my room and found a favourite pair of pyjamas. I glanced at the spare room but I could hear a few gentle snores and occasional coughing and knew he was still in there so I walked to the kitchen and made myself a hot chocolate, then microwaved some chinese left over from last night. Yeah, I'm not a great cook but I'm a demon with a microwave and a ready meal. Then I curled up on the sofa, grabbed the biography I'm reading and settled down to eat my dinner.

I woke up with a start. Sometime after polishing off the Singapore chow mien and starting Churchill's military career, I had dropped off. I peeled my face off the page and glanced at my
watch: two in the morning. I frowned, yawned and stretched—and then I heard the noise again. It was a soft cry—from my guest. I jumped up and walked to the door, gently pushing it open—to see him sitting up in bed, his green eyes wide and terrified but unseeing. His arms were raised to try to protect himself and he was trembling. He was having a nightmare.

I tentatively entered the room but stayed out of range: he didn't know I was here and he could catch me without meaning to if he lashed out. He was hyperventilating and his rasping breaths were loud in the room. Whatever he was seeing seemed to be pretty brutal and he gave a loud gasp.

"I won't let you have him!" he shouted, his rasping voice loud in the still of the night. "It doesn't matter what you do to me—I won't tell you where he is!"

I inched closer. His expression changed, from scared defiance to hurt.

"Please, Dad," he groaned, "don't do this! You can't trust him! Why—why can't you trust me? Why do you never believe me?"

He looked so upset, so wounded that I wanted to hug him but he was suddenly rigid.

"No…no! Toothless-HELP!"

He screamed and then collapsed back onto the pillow, breathing hard. He was looking pale and he coughed pitifully. Quietly, I crouched by his side and gently laid a hand on his forehead. He was still scorching hot and he gave a low moan. I sighed then gently brushed the hair off his forehead. He looked so alone. Then I rose and fetched a fan and a bowl of cold water. He whined gently as I switched on the fan and the cool air played over his fevered shape but he settled as I laid a cold face flannel on his forehead. His eyes fluttered open and he stared blearily up at me.

"F-feels nice," he murmured hoarsely.

"You had a nightmare," I told him softly. He groaned.

"I lost my leg again…" he mumbled slowly. Then he closed his eyes. "Sorry…I'll try not to disturb you again." I freshened his cold compress and he flashed a grateful smile.

"You need more antibiotics," I reminded him and gently fed him the next dose. He obediently swallowed and accepted paracetamol this time to tackle his fever. Then he sank easily back into sleep and I stared at the lanky shape on my spare bed.

What have I got myself into?

He woke twice more through the night, screaming and calling for 'Toothless'. Each time, he was frightened, wary and apologetic. There was definitely something he wasn't telling me but he was scared and sick and I didn't press.

I was wrecked the next morning and phoned in to let my supervisor know I was going to be in. Hiccup woke for his meds and every time he woke, I forced water down him like it was going out of fashion. He always smiled and thanked me, his rasping voice pitifully grateful. And then he slept. I sat and watched him, hating to feel helpless as I grabbed another shower, ate breakfast and read up on vascular trauma for my exams. But, no matter how much I concentrated, I couldn't get anything to stick. I really love trauma, love the thrills of emergency medicine and I know it's where my future lies, but I just couldn't focus. This whole experience was way too weird. Don't get me wrong: I love an adventure—hell, my life has been dedicated to ensuring I have an active and interesting future, but this was totally…unplanned. Then I shook my head. I wouldn't get anything accomplished here. I needed to clear my head—so I snorted, jumped up and changed into my
He wearily opened his eyes as I leaned over him and whispered that I was off for a run. He just nodded quietly and his eyes fluttered closed. I resisted the temptation to stroke his hair again and turned away, pulling on my phone, grabbing my keys and heading downstairs for some fresh air. I took a deep breath of the air as I emerged: it was a cool, grey day but I could smell the water in the docks, hear the gulls shriek overhead and I started the playlist. I needed to stretch my legs.

It was over an hour when I returned. I stopped at the local seven-eleven to pick up some supplies and jogged up the stairs to the apartment. I felt much better, no matter that I was sweaty and hot because my head was now clear. I could do this. No matter what was going on, I could deal with this. I turned the key and quietly entered, listening to the gentle snores. With a smile, I realised it was reassuring to hear someone else in the apartment: being self-sufficient is fine but having another human being in your life—however briefly or strangely—made me feel happy. I stowed the provisions and then went and check on my guest.

Hiccup had curled up on his side facing away from the door, his breathing a little easier. I checked my watch; it was almost time for his next meds and as I turned away to fetch the antibiotics, I caught a glimpse of his back. And I froze. He was skinny—I might have mentioned that—but the pale skin was scarred with red scars criss-crossing like something out of a medieval story. My blue eyes widened and I took a step back. I've seen stuff like this in forensics, in pictures of trauma and child abuse and torture survivors but I really didn't believe I'd ever see this in real life. And like the scars on his stump, these were red and fresh.

What the hell had happened to this guy?

I stared at him and try to rationalise this. If he was a bad guy, he would be scared of the authorities. Check. He wouldn't have anything to identify himself. Check. He's be calculating and have a plan. Hmm, not so much. He wouldn't come across as shy and embarrassed and vulnerable. That's for sure. He would have people he could contact. Not sure on that. He wouldn't be having nightmares and pleading for his father and the unseen others not to harm him. He'd be harder. And he seemed like he was at breaking point.

My heart had already categorised him as a good guy.

What the hell did I know anyway?

I turned away and force my breathing to calm but I could feel a well of sympathy for this guy, this skinny and unathletic one-legged man who seemed to have been on the wrong end of something horribly cruel. I got his tablets and gently woke him and gave him his drink. He offered me a watery smile.

"As soon as I'm a bit better, I'll go," he offered roughly. "I'm causing you a lot of trouble and I don't want to cause any more."

"No trouble," I told him absently. It wasn't: I had done some auxiliary work before university in care homes and the Emergency Department. Looking after sick people wasn't that hard. I gently laid a hand on his forehead. "Besides, you're still feverish. You're not going anywhere." He inspected me and said very quietly:

"I can leave anytime." There was enough steel in that voice to have me reconsidering my assessment of him. But I stared back, equally calculatingly.

"And I will hide your gods damned leg if you try!" I snapped. "You're still pretty sick and it will be
an utter waste of my time if you go out too soon and fall ill again!"

"Who made you my mother?" he shot back, roughly. He had gone pale again.

"You did!" I retorted. He was breathing heavily and he lifted a hand to his mouth. Luckily, I had an old bowl stowed by his bed just in case and I thrust it under his mouth as he leaned forward and threw up his water and his tablets. Immediately, I was at his side, holding the bowl, stroking his back and head as he retched until his stomach is empty. I remained at his side, murmuring reassurance until the heaves settled and he slumped back onto the pillows, sighing at his weakness.

"See?" he said with a flicker of defiance. "Right as rain!" I stroked the messy auburn hair off his forehead and he gave a little sigh of relief at the comfort.

"Wow, I can see you sprinting out of here in an instant!" I retorted gently. He gave a wry smile.

"I may…stay a little longer…until I can at least keep my lunch down," he mumbled. I smiled.

"Get some rest," I advised him. "I'll be back in a short while and see if we can get that antibiotic to stick." His eyes fluttered and his harsh breathing deepened into sleep.

I was woken by a thud and I sat up in alarm, my fists bunched and raised in defence. Reflections of the orange street lamps patterned the ceiling and I flicked on the bedside lamp. I thought for a moment and tried to recall what was happening before I heard a low moan. It all came back and then I threw back the covers and leapt out of bed, my bare feet racing towards the spare room. I pushed the door open and stared.

Hiccup was lying on the floor by the bed, cursing softly. He slowly lifted his head and gave me a chagrined look.

"I…erm…forgot I didn't have my leg on," he admitted. He managed to get to his knees and then sighed. "I…erm…need to get to the bathroom…erm…" He blushed and it was unexpectedly quite adorable so I hastened to his side and helped him up onto his foot, balanced shakily and still feverish. He looked at his prosthesis but I shook my head at the unspoken accusation.

"Your leg isn't healed yet," I told him sternly. "Lean on me. It's this way." He wrapped a long arm around my shoulders and leaned on me as we made our way to the adjacent bathroom. I could tell he was acutely embarrassed and really wanted to be able to move on his own. When we entered the bathroom, he stretched out a long arm and leaned against the wall, his weight rising from my shoulders.

"I'll be fine now," he murmured quietly. I could see his determination to at least be able to take himself to the toilet and turned to the door, pulling it to. I was ready to leap in if he failed but as I paced outside, I finally hear the flush and the rush of water. There was a halting step and he pulled the door open. He looks flushed with effort but there was a little satisfied smile. "Thanks," he said as I helped him hop awkwardly back to his bed. His balance wasn't the best and he almost toppled twice, but I saw him safely back and tucked him in.

"Call me if you need me," I made him promise and his green eyes flashed with thanks.

"I can never repay you for this," he admitted. I smiled back at him from the door.

"I'm not keeping score," I assured him and headed back to my bed.

By the next morning, his fever was coming down and his cough was improving. He woke and stayed awake, his eyes brighter and face looking less drawn. I rang in sick again and gathered his
clothes up, emptying his pockets and shoving everything into the washing machine. Then I made him breakfast. As I mentioned, I'm not the best cook but I managed some decent porridge and he wolfed the lot like a starving man...which he bore a close resemblance to, to be honest. He also polished off three rounds of toast and jam and then settled back, a satisfied smile on his face.

"Gods, I needed that," he admitted, sighing. I munched my slice of toast and marmalade and sat beside him.

"So what should I call you?" I asked him. He glanced at me, his eyes narrowing and looks offended.

"I told you. Hiccup." I blinked.

"Seriously? I-I thought you were delirious with fever!" I stammered, blushing. How embarrassing. That was REALLY his name? He sighed.

"If only it were so," he bemoaned, "but the gods hate me." I frowned. He caught my expression.

"Look, let's just say my parents were rather enamoured of the viking heritage they had and ensured I was raised with the old Norse gods rather than any modern religion. Hence the name. Hiccup. Means a mistake or accident...or the runt of the litter. And believe me, all of them apply to me!" There was a serious edge to his words and he sighed again.

"Sorry. I really thought it was a nickname." I am really sorry.

"Hey, it's not the worst," he admitted. "My surname for example."

"And that is...?"

"Haddock."

I suppressed a snigger and covered my mouth hastily. That was unpardonably rude.

"Sorry! As in the fish?" He nodded wearily.

"Fine old Scottish name," he deadpanned.

"Really?"

"And my middle name is Horrendous," he added defeatedly.

"So what is it?" I ask him. It can't that bad.

"Horrendous."

"So what is it?"

He rolled his eyes. Obviously this had happened before as well.

"My middle name is spelled H-O-double R-E-N-D-O-U-S. Horrendous. Really. Sorry." His tone was embarrassed. I stared at him, open-mouthed.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock. You're right. Your gods hate you. Or your parents. Or both." I regretted the words as soon as I say them because he flinched and looked away. There was a sudden look of apprehension on his open, genuine face and I felt ashamed at provoking it. "Oh, god-I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me. I really didn't mean..." He forced a brave smile onto his face and his green eyes swung back to me-but they were sad now.
"No, you're actually right," he added. "My father does hate me. And now he's searching for me."

He sighed. "You should let me go. I'll get away from here and no one will connect you to me and you will be safe."

His choice of words caused me to pause. Safe. Implying I was NOT safe while he's here. He didn't seem to be joking either, his eyes staring straight into mine and face serious. But he wasn't fit enough to leave the apartment, let alone go on the run again.

Did I seriously say 'on the run'?

"We both know you're nowhere near being capable of leaving this apartment yet," I told him equally seriously. "Give yourself another day at least before you leave."

I don't want you to leave. So I flailed around for another topic and something from his nightmare nagged at my memory.

"Who's Toothless?" I asked.

He went rigid and his eyes widened in shock and fear. Every bit of colour drained from his tired face as he stared at me as if I had asked the most personal question possible. I frowned. "You were calling for him when your fever was really high. Is he a friend? A brother?"

He looked at me for another moment and saved, as if weighing up my soul. He swallowed.

"Toothless is my dragon"
"DRAGON?"

My voice was incredulous and I stared at the man lying in the bed, his brilliant green eyes completely and utterly honest as he held my gaze for a second more. Then he looked at the seagrass matted floor and his long hands clenched. I reached out and grasped the closest—his left—and tightened my grip around his in reassurance. Absently, I felt callous on his long fingers and realise with horror his hand had been broken recently as well. His words ran through my memory.

You should let me go. I'll get away from here and no one will connect you to me and you will be safe.

"As in…mythological beasts, DragonSlayer, the Hobbit, that sort of thing?"

"Yes—not a Komodo Dragon," he replied dryly. "Wings, flapping, fire breathing reptiles—exactly that sort of thing." I stared at him.

"You're a zoo keeper?" I accused him. He stared at me—then started laughing. It's a good sound, an open and pleasant laugh.

"If only," he said. Then he surprised me. "This is a secret. You can't tell anyone else. Look—I know you're a doctor or medic of some sort. You understand doctor-patient confidentiality. This must stay a secret. Please?" I nodded.

"Final year," I told him. He smirked.

"You're good," he complimented me. "Probably saved my life. Now let me tell why I'm here—and why you have to let me go." I scooted a little closer but didn't let his hand go. He smiled and closed his grasp on mine. "By the way, it was Astrid, wasn't it?"

"Astrid Hofferson," I confirmed. I didn't tell him the rest. I had a feeling it may freak him out.

"Divine strength," he murmured. "That's the Norse meaning."

"I'm named after a friend of my mother's," I revealed. "She's Norwegian. She's a physio somewhere in the Midlands." He smiled and his grip on my hands tightened for a second.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Hofferson," he said and I blushed.

"Sooo….dragons…" I said, trying to get my heart rate under control. He nodded.

"There have been legends for centuries about fire-breathing beasts, reptiles that possess amazing abilities," he said, his voice calm and clear. "But no one has ever found objective evidence of their existence—so far. No fossils. No indirect evidence. No genetic trace. And then, in the archives of the University of Leipzig, a much older—and totally disregarded—manuscript from Viking times spoke of a dragons' nest and this time, there was a map. There were also papers by someone called Bork who claimed to have studied the various dragons and gave valuable insights into their habits, abilities and life cycle. And he suggested that when times were harsh or 'unfavourable', they retreated and hibernated as eggs—until the world changed in their favour."

"Eggs? As in a nest?" I frowned. He nodded.
"The maps showed the dragons had buried their eggs a long way from human habitation as the world's climate changed for the worse and the land became more locked in ice. The nest was finally located on Kvitoya, one of the islands of Svalbard, far above the Arctic circle. Five years ago, a clutch of forty dragon eggs was found and taken into the custody of a British and European joint force. The eggs were taken to a secret research base in the wilds of Scotland and studied and hatched by a handpicked force dedicated to the study, preservation and training of the new dragons."

"Force?" My ears pricked. I hadn't heard of this at any time during training. He looked embarrassed again and rolled his expressive eyes.

"Um…the Biologic European Resource for Counterterrorism. Or 'BERK'. Sorry."

"BERK? You know what that means?"

He winced then nodded.

"The homonym, anyway. Any in many ways, apt," he added sarcastically.

"Counterterrorism is spelled with a 'C'," I pointed out.

"Not apparently in German," Hiccup said with a sigh. "European." I looked cynical. "Okay-I guess that found a name they liked—probably one from the manuscript—and tried to fit an acronym around it!" He shrugged.

"Counterterrorism? DRAGONS?" My voice was incredulous.

"Apparently, it's a funding thing," he admitted with a wry smile. "Lots of funding to fight terrorism out there. Not so much for extinct mythological reptiles..." I looked at him and tried not to laugh at his sarcasm.

"And you don't strike me as the military type," I pointed out. He made a gesture to his scrawny shape.

"Who, me? How could you fail to notice all this raw Vikingness?" he quipped then sighed as he caught my expression. "You're right. I'm no military man. But my Dad is. He heads up the whole damned thing." I frowned. Haddock. Haddock?

"General Stoick Haddock?" I murmured. He rolled his eyes.

"Gods. Even a random stranger I run into in an alley has heard of my Dad!" he groaned.

"But he's a legend!" I protested. "Stoick 'the Vast' Haddock. Special Forces, Counter-Terrorism, Military Intelligence..." He slapped his forehead in exasperation.

"And the single worst father in the history of the world!" he cut in. I stared at him. "Look, I'm his only son...his only child. He's Scottish—obviously—but my Mom was Canadian and he served in the States on secondment for years. We moved around so much I have very little idea where I have actually been. My Mom died when I was about three and since then, it's been him and me. And by that, I mean...me. He's never there. I was stuck in a new school with every move. And being a small talking fishbone, I ended up with no friends but the best selection of bullies in the Western hemisphere." I stared at him. That sounded awful. He caught my expression and he tried to force a smile onto his face but he failed miserably—so he shrugged. "It's not all bad. I got to inspect a lot of emergency rooms after being beaten up and being so useless at sports, I managed to concentrate on my studies. I graduated early which was even more handy when he moved here five years ago
when he took over the project."

"So you moved to the Project, to Scotland?" I asked. He nodded, sighing. He gave a small cough and took a little sip of water. He was starting to look tired but it was the longest I'd had him awake and I wanted to prolong the contact. His hand tightened on mine.

"I got unofficially attached to the project," he admitted. "As you rightly guessed, I'm not a military type. I was really small-the runt-when I was younger and even when I finally put on the inches vertically, they didn't come anywhere else. So now I really am a talking fishbone. I'm clumsy-even before I lost my leg. And I'm a computer nerd. I was attached to the information department, working through my computing degree course-I finished in just over a year. The others who were there were meant to bond with and train the dragons and I was supposed to be kept out of the way. My father wanted a son like him-strong, athletic, aggressive- and it's really difficult to stand there, staring into his disappointed eyes every single day."

His voice was wistful and he looked really unhappy. My parents died when I was sixteen but I knew my Dad loved me and was proud of me-as was Mum. I couldn't imagine feeling they despised me every single day. My grip tightened on his hand and he looked up with a very wan smile.

"Doesn't anyone…?" I began and he shrugged awkwardly.

"My Dad's second in command, 'Gobber', has always been more supportive," he admitted softly. "But even he was angry when I wandered in at the wrong time. The eggs were hatching and the rarest egg-that of the Night Fury, the fastest and smartest dragon-had just hatched. And he rejected everyone put before him. They were debating who they could put forward and muggins here-who had ignored the whole security and keep out thing-blundered into the hatching pit. The other troops glared at me and one of them slammed me aside. He wanted the Night Fury for himself. But the young dragon snarled at him, rejecting him and then he turned to where I was lying sprawled on my back. His green eyes met mine and he immediately imprinted on me. He ran at me, licked my face and landed straight on my chest. And he purred."

And his lips curled up in a reminiscent smile, the emotion warming his words. It was clearly one of his best memories.

"My Dad, of course, was mad and insisted I give him up. But I was bonded, already joined to the dragon and he refused. And nothing my Dad could say or do could sever that bond." He sighed and I saw his breathing had accelerated. I stared at him again: there was pain behind the words that he didn't want to expand on. I squeezed his hand again and he looked up with that little brave smile again.

"You don't have to go on if you don't want to," I told him, absolving him of the burden of completing the tale if it's causing him so much distress. But he shook his head.

"No, it's okay." he told me with his lopsided smile. "I bonded with the Night Fury. He has retractable teeth so I called him 'Toothless'."

"Obvious," I commented dryly. I was starting to get an idea of his sense of humour as well. He grinned.

"You have no idea," he shot back. "Or the fact that I was about as wanted as a case of pox. The others basically froze me out and I floundered in the training-but I was getting kinda uncomfortable in any case. The training and whole ethos was really military when it's clear dragons aren't fierce but are kind, gentle, amazing creatures that are loyal, protective and brave. They were trying to
change them into killing machines, into strike weapons. And that isn't who they are. Or who I am either."

He paused and his face became shadowed. He wasn't happy and it was really clear something bad had gone down.

"A couple of the guys-Dagur and Savage-were becoming more ruthless and training their dragons to kill. Dagur was the guy who tried to get Toothless and who barged me aside. He was paired with a Skrill—a dragon that collects electrical current and emits it as lightning." I gaped: that really sounded like something out of science fiction. "Dagur was a coupla men short of a football team—we called him Deranged—and he was really violent all the time. He used to get in fights—deliberately—and when they suspected I was trying to watch them and keep them clear of Toothless, he and Savage ambushed me once and beat the shit outta me." He tightened his grip on my hand and the abrupt pressure made me wince. He was suddenly apologetic.

"Oh my gods, I'm sorry!" he gasped and I flashed him a reassuring smile, squeezing his hand back.

"No, it's no biggie, Hiccup," I assured him gently. "Look, if you need a break, I can wait…" He sagged.

"I know it's tough but I don't think I've ever told anyone this," he admitted. Then he blinked. "Gods, that's pathetic, isn't it? Is it any wonder my nickname was Useless?" I gasped and my heart ached for him. I grasped his hand with my other one and stared up into the despondent face.

"Look, Hiccup," I say sincerely, "it's really obvious you haven't had anyone when you should've had your Dad and your colleagues protecting your back. Who was there for you?"

"Toothless," he admitted, his voice rough and eyes shining suspiciously. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard to try to compose himself. "Toothless was always there for me—even when I realised that we had traitors in BERK. People who were leaking information out about the dragons and people were paying attention. Alvin "Treacherous' Tindall was the worst. He's an arms dealer and he wanted us! He wanted fire-breathing dragons as the ultimate ordnance to hire out! I tried to tell my Dad and he just blanked me. He believed Dagur, considered him a son and a fine warrior. All I could be was the disappointing clumsy nerd son who screwed up the process."

And then Dagur and Savage made their move—and they tried to get Toothless. I got in the way and deflected their initial strike—and in recompense, I was attacked. The Skrill got me down and was going to kill me. My left leg was mauled beyond repair—but Toothless saved my life and drove them away before the Skrill could rip me apart. I had no idea what they had done to that dragon because normally, I can train them, calm them down and make them obey." He shook his head and closed his eyes. His voice was pained. "They had to amputate my leg immediately to save my life—there was venom in the wound and I was…I was barely sedated." His voice dropped and I felt my flesh crawl. Even in battlefield medicine, there are quick-acting agents that can be given to take the pain and memory away. But it was clear no one bothered to spare Hiccup. And I could hear in his voice he still saw and felt that act. But he forced himself to carry on talking.

"The wound was a mess and it got repeatedly infected. My father seemed to imagine I would just get up and walk away from it—and was crushingly disappointed that I actually took some time after nearly dying from blood poisoning to get back on my feet. And because we didn't officially exist and I had to be able to handle—and fly—Toothless, I needed a false leg that would perform all functions. I could hardly access the local hospital or even the military medical service resources. How—how could I explain such a wound? It was clearly some awful traumatic injury. In the end, I designed my own prosthesis with Gobber's help but I had barely started walking when it was clear that they were attacking us, trying to undermine and destroy the unit. We had to fend off repeated
attacks from Alvin and Dagur. And they were after all our dragons—but especially Toothless.” I frowned.

"Why?" I asked. "Why Toothless?" And he gave that small smile that I was coming to know was his most genuine.

"Because my bud is a Night Fury—and they are the fiercest, fastest and most intelligent of all the dragons. The others all look to him to lead them. And he's clever and brave." He sighed. "And they all knew he was the key: whoever had Toothless could control the dragons. I had no faith in the security of the base because there seemed to be so many leaks and no one-no one-would take my concerns seriously, even after Dagur and Savage defected so I broke security, got Toothless away and hid him. I headed away south but once away from Toothless, I was on my own. I was captured."

And then he fell silent. I looked at him and I saw his hands trembling, his face pale. His eyes were filled with painful memory and I squeezed his hand tight. "Hiccup," I implored him. "Stop. You don't have to do this. You don't have to tell me everything. I don't need to know!"

"But you deserve to," he said wretchedly. "They wanted Toothless back and they would do anything to get me to tell them where he was hidden."

And I recall the bruises over his ribs and cheek, the broken fingers, the livid scars on his back.

"They tortured me," he admitted quietly. "They did that back in BERK, in the complex—under my own father's orders. And…and he should have been proud of how well I defied them but he just screamed at me to give up, to hand my dragon over. But he isn't a strike weapon or a thing to be traded for my safety—he's my friend!"

It's too much. I pushed forward and pulled my hands from his, instead wrapping my arms around him and he buried his head in my shoulder. I felt his lanky arms circle my body and his hands closed on me as well. The slight jerking of his shoulders told me he was fighting sobs and I just held him tighter until he finally stiffened and pulled away. His face was shy and embarrassed. And also grateful.

"I'm sorry," I said stupidly. But he smiled gently.

"I'm more grateful than I can say," he assured me and swiped his face with a hand. I didn't mention his tears because I felt like crying myself. How could anyone treat this kind, awkward, shy guy so cruelly? He wasn't a calculating or cold man who was playing me—I could feel it. He was in pain. He was desperate. And he was scared.

"So how are you here?" I asked him. He sighed wretchedly.

"Gobber," he admitted. "He took pity on me. He didn't find the sight of me screaming all that amusing. He came to see me when I was in the brig, curled up and hopeless. He was disappointed but I just begged him to watch out because there are still leaks from our intel. And I told him I would die before I betrayed Toothless." He took a painful breath and then he gave a slight smile. "So he freed me. Maybe he hoped I'd go and get Toothless and they could find him that way. But I just hitched south then stowed away in a delivery van. I ended up in the middle of nowhere. I kept walking, hitching where I could and trying to keep off the radar. I knew they were looking for me—on any electronic interaction, any CCTV, any computer record. But finally, after maybe eight, nine days—I ended up here, at the back of the docks after the lorry I hitched on delivered to the restaurant over by the gallery. I ended up walking and feeling really weird…and then I met you."
"Wow," I murmured. "I can see why you were scared." He nodded.

"So now you see why I have to go," he reminded me.

"And you can see why I can't let you out when you haven't even walked to the toilet on your own!" I shot back. He groaned.

"Is-is this how it's going to be?" he asked plaintively. I folded my arms and glared at him.

"You know, you look like you've run a marathon," I told him. "You barely woke up yesterday. And today you've told me your story and gone through the emotional wringer again. Lay back and get some rest. I'll wake you for lunch." His glorious green eyes shone and he smiled, running his hands tiredly through his messy auburn hair then obediently lying back on his pillows. I fussed over him by plumping his pillows and tidying his sheet because I felt he deserved to know someone cared. I felt justified as his pale face relaxed as he closed his eyes and dropped off.

Once he was asleep, I wandered out and flipped open my laptop. I paused and stole a glance at the guest room. It almost feels like a betrayal but I log on and type in 'General Stoick Haddock'.

An image of a huge uniformed man with enormous bushy flame red beard and cool grey-blue eyes appears. I scrolled down his list of achievements and citations and then it strikes me. There is nothing newer than four and a half years old. He's still alive, according to Wikipedia and I read his entry. And it's there:

Spouse: Valka (deceased)

Children: Hiccup

I stared at a little image on the web page and see the man with a small boy with the same brilliant green eyes belonging to the man in my guest room. The boy is very small and the father shows no evidence of any interaction with the small boy. It's a picture, I realise, from the wife's funeral, yet the father remains stoic and completely ignores the grieving little boy. He isn't even holding the boy's hand.

I stared at the hard face again, then typed in the next query: "BERK".

The screen went blank and then the search returned "no results found." I tried all sorts of variations and got the same result each time. And then it began to worry me. Because the search engine should suggest Berkeley or Berkshire or Berkelium…but it's as if that combination of four letters has been erased from the web.

I snapped the laptop closed and worried that I have just made a horrible mistake.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I have name-checked my sister in law in the last chapter (ASTRID the physio) :)

First person POV is Astrid only.

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Hiccup woke for lunch and I didn't mention my investigations. Instead, after supermarket pizza and wedges, I checked he was okay and got him to talk about Toothless. That seemed to cheer him up and his green eyes sparkled as he described how he trained the dragon, taught him to fly with a rider and accept a saddle. He spoke of the dragon as a friend, a confidante, a pet and as a companion. And it was very clear from his voice that there was a bond of love between the two.

As I watched him, I found myself filling facts about him in my mental database. His lopsided smile that was really cute. The way he talked with his hands and his shoulders for emphasis. The way he rubbed the back of his neck when he felt awkward or embarrassed. The fact he blushed easily. The way he was clearly uncomfortable in the presence of a woman, almost certainly because he hadn't really had a lot of practice-and the memory of his words about his school days, of being scorned and bullied return. The fact that he was left-handed. The fact that he had a slight stammer that became obvious when he talked about his father or BERK. The fact he seemed terrified of being recaptured.

He dozed during the afternoon and by evening, his fever had started to rise again. He insisted again that he should leave and I let him try to put his prosthesis on but the moment it sat against his stump, he screamed and jerked his leg away, breathing hard, his face dripping sweat. He cuddled his amputated leg against his body and rocked back and forth until the surge of agony subsided. Then he looked up and his expression was embarrassed.

"You were right," he sighed and accepted my help to the bathroom.

He slept deeply that night without nightmares or falling out of bed and I dried and ironed his clothes. I noted his size so that when I headed out for my run the next morning, I popped early in to collect him fresh underwear. He was awake when I presented him with the gift and he blushed again. He stared at the floor for a long moment.

"I hope this isn't a ploy to completely undress me," he said in a serious tone, though his eyes were twinkling.

"Oh, I definitely intend to get my hands on your undies!" I teased him back. He grinned and munched through his plate of scrambled eggs on toast. I suspect they were rubbery but he was too polite to comment. Then he surprised me.

"I wonder…could I have a shower?" he asked me. I stared at him and realised he must feel horrible. I couldn't guess when he last had the opportunity and nodded but my eyes were concerned.
"Of course…but are you…I mean can you…?" I asked. He gave a wry smirk.

"Yeah-kinda had to," he reminded me. "When I lost my leg, my Dad wanted to…encourage…me to be independent as soon as possible. Asgard forbid anyone help his useless Hiccup of a son!" His tone had briefly turned bitter and I looked at him in surprise. He covered his eyes and shook his head. "Sorry," he murmured. "I guess I'm just a little sensitive." I smiled and nodded.

"I'll get you a towel," I offered in the awkward silence that follows. "I'm afraid I've only got girly smelling products, though…" Hiccup tried to look concerned but instead, he just looked tired and shrugged, something his lanky frame was particularly well designed for.

"If anything, it'll throw them off my scent," he said dryly. "Or completely vindicate Snotlout and Tuff!"

I helped him to the bathroom and made sure he was happy with the shower and had everything he needed. Then I let him know I needed to go in: I had a meeting with my supervisor and an assignment to hand in. Fortunately, after this, it was revision block prior to Finals and whether I went in or not then was up to me. And as I was straight honours in all blocks, I could make my own timetable. He absolved me of the need to hover like a worried mother and said he would be fine. So I flashed him a little smile and grabbed my bag, then headed out. I heard the water start as I slammed the door.

Hiccup emerged after a hot shower that left him exhausted, hopping unsteadily to collapse onto the sofa. He had changed into the clean underwear Astrid had brought him and he was wrapped in her large fluffy dressing gown. Fortunately, it was a dark brown: he wasn't sure he could have coped with the baby blue that seemed to be her favourite colour. He ran his fingers through his towel-dried auburn hair and lay back. He was exhausted, as Astrid had said but he felt more himself. Despite the lingering and horrible cough that stabbed little needles into his cracked rubs and tore at his sore throat, his muscles had stopped aching and his head was clear.

He had to keep moving: if he stayed too long, they would figure out where he was and then Astrid would be in danger.

He gave a low moan in his throat and closed his eyes. Astrid. Gods, how could this have happened? The Gods really did hate him. Because here he was, on the run and in fear of his life and he met Astrid. Blonde, beautiful, flashing deep blue eyes, fiercely independent, spirited and smart. Literally the girl of his dreams—and he had to collapse on her floor, pretty much dying of some infection. He face-palmed and gave a deep sigh that ended in a hacking cough. He couldn't have managed to look more useless in front of her.

He shuddered. Useless. They had taunted him with that word long before they made his life Hel, long before he had screwed up the entire mission. The others in BERK were all military—even Major Gothi, the ancient Medical Officer—all except Hiccup and they had really made his life miserable. He unconsciously rubbed his left hand with his right, his fingers lingering over the callouses. He winced and suppressed a groan. He had tried to forget how he got the broken fingers but the image lurched treacherously into his memory.

"You like that don't you?"

The pain exploded, the finger snapping and his scream echoing through the room.

"You'll…never…get…him..."
His words had been rough, soaked in pain but steely with determination. They could snap his whole hand off: Toothless would be safe.

Another finger was broken and the scream was more urgent.

"We have all night, you know."

"Ngh…"

"You know, in the end, Alvin will always get what he wants."

His eyes snapped open, the green depths wild with fear. He jerked almost upright and he fought to master his breathing. He leaned forward and winced: he knew that he had to get moving. Then he caught sight of her laptop, resting quietly on the desk by the alphabetically arranged CDs and DVDs. He got up slowly and half-hopped across to the chair, sliding his trembling frame into place and lifting the screen. Immediately, he faced a picture of younger Astrid, cuddling with her parents and grandmother. His breath froze, recognising a picture of a loving family-something he had given up longing for but always envied. Then he realised: she hadn't password protected her laptop because she lived alone: he had access.

He launched the internet browser and swiftly typed in a search: DRAGONS+SCOTLAND and waited as the search rolled down. There was nothing recent, just the handful of sighting over the last four years that counted as Loch Ness Monster sightings or crackpots seeing aliens or RAF fighters. He smirked: as if anyone could mistake a Night Fury for a Tornado! Then he carefully checked Loch Ness and Loch Lomond for monster sightings. Finally—with a small prayer to Thor—he searched his own name.

The tiny image of his three year old self at his mother's funeral flashed up but little else. The suppression of his existence from the internet had been one of the duties of the IT department, one of his former duties. Everyone at BERK had their life before sanitised and preserved in vanilla anonymity but after joining, they just vanished. All mentions of dragons or sightings were discredited and gently erased and all mention of BERK was completely wiped clean. Not one word was to escape from the bunker and base. He sighed and his cursor lazied over the browsing history and he blinked: he saw his name. Then he realised. It wasn't his name but…

GENERAL STOICK HADDOCK.

Gods damn it. She had searched his father.

And then he glanced up the history and glimpsed the other searches. His blood ran cold.

BERK.

"Astrid—why did you do it?" he whispered. She had searched every possible combination, homonym and acronym. And that determination of search would alert the protocols that suppressed all mention of the base. It was tantamount of waving a flag and shouting 'Come and visit me!' He swallowed and closed the browser. And then he paused. Hating himself and wondering why he did it, he opened her emails.

He shuddered. This was creepy stalker territory and just doing this made him feel dirty: it was abysmally poor repayment for her kindness and friendship. He scrolled down and read random spam, material from her medical course, enquiries about a holiday in Thailand and an invitation to a 'girls night out' from the Trauma Team. He sighed...and then, at the bottom of the page, he froze.

Armynet.
His cursor hovered over the entry and he felt his heart drop to his boots. The official British Army website. His heart in his mouth, he clicked on the link and saw images flash up that made him freeze. And then he realised who he was logged in as: Lieutenant Astrid Hofferson.

"No," he moaned, an exhalation of pain and betrayal. She couldn't be... So he clicked on her photos folder. And his green eyes flicked over the contents, hoping it was a mistake: images of Astrid, her friends, her family—even her pet dog from when she was a child. In all of them, Astrid was beautiful, calm and happy. Her eyes sparkled and showed her joy. He felt his heart warm. But he searched through newer folders and then he froze. The images changed: Astrid in uniform; Astrid in fatigues; Astrid at Boot camp: Astrid on a training expedition; Astrid at the firing range; Astrid at her passing out parade. Astrid the soldier.

He snapped the laptop closed, shaking. He was angry and shocked and almost heart-broken. He had been falling for her and now she had this huge secret that she hadn't been able to tell him. Or had she felt unable to tell him when he had made plain his distrust of the military. And how could she? He had no right to expect her to expose every part of her life to him. She had saved his life: she owed him nothing. He blinked and ran his hands through his hair again then he levered himself painfully to his foot. It didn't matter. He had to go. He turned to his room and hopped across, then determinedly entered. He threw off the dressing gown and hastily pulled on his clothes before sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling the sock over his stump. With a hiss, he pulled on the prosthesis and strapped it tight. It was almost as painful as he could bear but he dragged his jeans leg down and fastened his boot, then stumbled to his feet. He groaned and grasped his leather jacket, grabbing his possessions and restoring them to his pockets.

He limped to the bathroom, found his antibiotics and, with a hesitation, he took them. He also grabbed some aspirin before searching the kitchen and taking a sandwich and a bottle of water. Finally, he walked to the laptop and snagged a piece of paper, then scrawled a quick letter.

He had to pause and take a shuddering breath before he opened the door and walked into the little lobby, then took the lift down to the ground floor. Finally, he fastened his leather jacket and stuffed his hands in his pockets before walking out into the cold day. The temperature was a few degrees above freezing, the wind was icy and the sky was a threatening grey. He felt his spirits plummet and dragged his collar up. Then he gave another long, hacking cough and began to limp away from the building.

oOo

"Target is on the move."

"Check. Positive ID."

"Orders?"

"Tail him to the road. Then make your move."

oOo

I entered the apartment with a carrier bag of provisions I picked up on the way back from the University, my face flushed with the cold wind. The apartment was quiet and I wondered if Hiccup had dozed off after his shower. I dumped the bag on the side and checked his room.

It was empty.

Worry rose in my throat and I swiftly checked the bathroom and living area—to confirm that he was
gone. Then I saw the note, laid neatly on top of my laptop. Trembling, I lifted the paper and stared at the words:

Dear Astrid,

I cannot thank you enough for your care and kindness at a time when I needed it most. I know that I have to leave and I cannot wait any longer or I will put you in danger. Please do not follow me.

I have taken the antibiotics, some aspirin, water and food. I also took £20 from the drawer. If it is possible, I will send it back to you.

My undying thanks - HHH

I blinked and read the note again. My eyes were burning and I felt like…I'd been dumped. God, that sounded so feeble! But I'd got used to having him around and mentally I had been hoping to spend the evening with him again. Nothing like that-just the chance to spend time with another human being. But I had no idea where he had gone and I doubted I'd ever see him again. I sighed and turned back to the kitchen to put the milk in the fridge and stow the pasta I had bought for our supper. Aimlessly, I clicked on the kettle and then the doorbell buzzed.

I glanced up. Hardly anyone knew my address and none of them would call me at this time. I wondered if he'd come back, feeling unwell and I raced to the door, unhitching the deadbolt and wrenching it open. And then I gaped and backed away.

Before me stood a huge man, well over six and a half feet, enormously powerful build and sheathed in an army General's uniform. His flaming hair was buzz cut but he had a huge beard more suited for the navy than the army. His steely grey-blue eyes swept over me and I backed away another pace. I knew who this is.

General Stoick Haddock.

"I've come for my son," he said.
"Come in," I invited him, completely taken off guard. How the hell had they found me? But I guessed somewhere as well resourced would have a lot of intel support and I sighed. He stomped heavily through the door, followed by a shorter and younger man with piercing blue eyes and black hair. I read his name-tag: JORGENSEN.

"Where is he?" the General demanded. I sighed again.

"Gone, sir," I admitted and fetched the note, handing it to him. He read it then handed it to his companion.

"What is he to you?" the General asked. I met his level gaze hardly blushing at all.

"I treated him," I reported. "I found him in an alley, collapsed with a high fever and an infected stump. He was gravely ill. So I brought him here and treated him." He scowled. "He begged me not to take him to hospital. He-he seemed really scared." He rubbed his forehead and sighs.

"Aye, he would be," he admitted in a gentler voice. His broad Scottish accent sounded sad. "He didn't have an easy time after the accident." He nodded. "How long has he been gone?" I paused and thought. I wasn't away that long and the bathroom definitely showed evidence of a shower.

"Maybe an hour?" I suggested. He turned.

"Thank you for your help, Lieutenant," he said and I blinked in shock.

"Sir?" I asked him. He looked at me. "How did you find him?"

"Your search for BERK tipped us off," he told me. "But finding you were already in the army was just a piece of serendipity. I know I can rely on you for absolute discretion." Or else. I stared at him.

"He told me about the dragons," I revealed. He sighed and shook his head, the floorboards creaking under his weight. I noted his boots were perfectly polished and I could see my anxious face in them.

"Hiccup," he growled in exasperation. The younger man rolled his eyes.

"Might have known Useless couldn't keep his mouth shut!" he said snidely. Both Stoick and I glared at him simultaneously and he caught my expression with interest.

"My son is not useless," the General snapped. "But why are you…looking so annoyed, Lieutenant?" I blushed.

"Considering he made his way down here with no backup and no resources and has evaded you for a couple of weeks, that would suggest he isn't exactly useless, doesn't it, sir?" I replied, keeping the defensive anger from my voice. The images of his injuries played across my memory. "And as for keeping his mouth shut…" Stoick gave a deeper scowl.

"Accepted. My son is resourceful, stubborn and now gone from here," he said, bringing the conversation to a close. "Sergeant—signal the team. He's gone."

"And he's in danger, isn't he?" I asked, my tone soft. He looked at me. Did he pick something up in
my voice?

"You're army, medical aren't you?" he asked. I nodded.

"Final year, just waiting for Finals," I explained.

"And you know about BERK and the dragons?" he asked. I nodded.

"Yes, sir," I confirmed. He appraised me even closer. I was certain he will have reviewed everything the army has on me, my school record, course marks...even which badges I took in Girl Guides. I find my heart is pounding in my chest and I tried to stand at ease, which was really hard in my own apartment with him staring at me.

"And you are concerned about my son?"

I paused then finally nodded. "Very much, sir," I said in a low voice. He stared at me, calculatingly then nodded.

"You have five minutes to pack," he decided. "Leave your uniform. We have fatigues at the base." I stared up at him, then exploded into action, grabbing a bag and stuffing clothes, shoes, wash-bag, computer, phone, pictures of my family and books in. I grabbed my coat and handbag and stared defiantly up at him.

"Quick enough, sir?" I asked. His lips curled in a slight smile.

"Four minutes thirty-seven," he complimented me. "Ready?" I cast one last glance around my home-gods knew when or if I would ever see it again-and then I clicked off the light. I grabbed my keys.

"Always, sir," I confirmed. He turned to Jorgenson.

"Call Gobber," he ordered. "Tell him Hiccup has escaped but is close-and we've got a new recruit for BERK."

Hiccup blearily opened his eyes, his head pounding. He blinked a couple of times and then lifted his head-to hear a sickeningly familiar voice.

"Hello, brother." He tried not to shudder and sighed.

"I'm not your brother," he said automatically, feeling his wrists tied tightly behind his back. He tested the ropes: firm. His limited view told him he was in the back of a mid-blue van, concealed from casual view. The back doors were out of reach and the sliding side door was too far away to be of help either. They had tossed him on a filthy blanket, roped at the wrists but not at the ankles...though his metal leg may have confused them there. A hand grabbed his hair and painfully dragged him into a slouched sitting position, his head spinning with the after-effects of the blow they had dealt him to knock him unconscious. He was already feeling sick and the hacking cough that stabbed at his cracked ribs did nothing to help him. He groaned and stared up-into a pair of insane, pale green eyes. "Hello, Dagur," he added.

The traitor gave a demented grin and his eyes glittered menacingly. "It's been too long," he murmured. Hiccup suppressed the sigh he wanted to give, knowing it would just anger the madman.
"Not long enough," he murmured. The blow that earned him dumped him onto his back and he lay there, his head spinning and another painful cough shaking his form. He thought longingly of the apartment but recalled that they had captured him less than a mile from the little haven: if he had stayed, Astrid would have been in danger.

"Oh, I am disappointed, brother," Dagur said in his sing-song voice. "We used to have such fun." Hiccup frowned.

"I don't recall it like that," he complained. "Beating me up, breaking my hand, threatening to kill me…yeah, loved it." Dagur lunged forward and caught the younger man's hair, holding him still. The van lurched and the man almost fell over Hiccup, though he was leaning dangerously close.

"Oh, brother," Dagur breathed into his ear. "I can do so much more to ensure you have a fun time.” Hiccup swallowed. Dagur was deranged, sadistic and, he suspected, attracted to him. None of these made an appetising combination and he knew Dagur's definition of 'fun' bore no resemblance to the dictionary one. Hiccup cringed back.

"I'm good," he replied. Dagur just scowled, his eyes sliding over the lanky form folded before him.

"You're beautiful," he murmured in a low voice and Hiccup began to cringe inwardly. He had never felt comfortable with Dagur and now he was really starting to worry. "But you know what would make you more beautiful?"

"Releasing me into the wild? A holiday in Bermuda? Expensive facial?"

"This!" And Dagur punched him in the face. Hiccup managed to roll a little with the blow but his lip split and his head was ringing with the impact. He tasted blood and grimaced. "Beautiful," Dagur moaned, his rough finger trailing across the bleeding lip and then sucking on the bloody finger. Hiccup almost froze. Dagur was leaning really close and his eyes were filled with…lust. Then the man pulled back and nodded and Hiccup felt rough hands grab him and haul him back onto his knees. He almost gave a sigh of relief until he realised who it was.

"Savage!" he exclaimed thickly. "I should have known."

"You got away from us before, boy, but now we've got all the time we need," the man said from behind Hiccup. Dagur gave a nasty laugh and nodded to Hiccup.

"How's my handiwork?" he asked. Hiccup clenched his fists as the ropes were released and Savage wrenched his left hand forward. The prisoner gave a shudder and his forest green eyes darkened with fear.

"It's fine," he said softly but flinched as Dagur gently stroked his finger over the younger man's clenched fist. Then he grabbed the hand with both of his and forced it open, his fist tightening brutally around the middle finger and bending it back agonisingly. Hiccup gasped. "You…you do know that I won't tell you where Toothless is, no matter what you do?" Dagur laughed: Hiccup's face was ashen, his eyes dark with fear and he was breathing fast, though the occasional cough could be responsible for that.

"You know, we don't need you to. Not anymore," he taunted Hiccup. The prisoner stared at him in horror. "Your friends in Berk worked out a radius based on where you were recaptured and your average calculated terrain-specific walking speed bladda bladda blah! So they knew the area where you should have hidden the Night Fury. And in that range, there are only a few good prospects. And of course—what they know, we know. So we take you there and we give your little scaly friend a choice: we make you scream and either he comes and rescues you or we keep torturing you until
"I think he'll be cool with that," he whimpered. Dagur gave a sigh and pulled the finger further back.

"I'm disappointed," he admitted. "I though he was more loyal than that. He certainly was when he attacked my Skrill for you! But maybe he's realised you're just a Hiccup!" Hiccup sagged. He hoped that Toothless would do the smart thing and leave him but he had a horrible feeling that Dagur was right and his dragon would come running at the sounds of his cries. The only thing he could do was to make a sound-and that was likely to be even harder than it sounded.

"What can I say? Not gonna change now." Hiccup muttered then shrank under the madman's gaze. Dagur gave a nasty smile, pulled Hiccup's finger back harder. And then he broke it.

I found myself in a plush Mercedes with tinted windows, parked just outside my apartment building. Stoick was seated in the front and I took a seat in the back, next to a well-ripped man with neat carrot red hair and pale green eyes. His scrappy jeans and loose check shirt contrasted with his precise movements. His fingers were dancing over the keyboard of a computer and two screens were fixed to the back of the front seats. The General stared in the rear view mirror to meet his eyes.

"Show me where he went, Ozzie," he commanded as a head's-up display projected on the back of the windscreen for him to see. CCTV cameras scrolled through until I saw the lanky shape limping out of my building.

"Seventy-three minutes ago," he read. I watched Hiccup limp painfully, his face tense and motions secretive and wary. He looked afraid.

"Follow him," Stoick ordered and the young man-Ozzie-skilfully tracked Hiccup's progress via every camera on a shop, building or security pole until they reached a narrow cut-through to the main road. He vanished in-but the corresponding camera didn't show him leave. I blinked and the cameras all displayed the same thing. But a van pulled across the 'exit' screen just for a moment then sped away. My finger stabbed at it.

"Is there another angle?" I asked. Ozzie flipped through his options, then pulled up a store camera. In the corner of the image, above a woman having a haircut, we saw the van-and this time, we could just see a man dragging something in through the side door. A few moments of magnification and enhancement revealed the shape of Hiccup being tossed into the van by a man who looked familiar. Then I realised: I had passed him on my run that morning.

"Who owns that van?" Stoick asked in a growl. The number plate was swiftly enhanced, displayed and looked up. Ozzie grinned.

"ALVCORP," he murmured. I raised an eyebrow, feeling left out. "Outcast Holdings, sir."

"So Alvin has him," the General sighed. "Track the van."

The screens began to flip faster than I could make out, views of roads and traffic signals zooming by. "It's an enhanced and intelligent ANPR programme," Ozzie explained to me, seeing my confusion. "Automatic number plate recognition. The police use them but this is more powerful. Hiccup developed this version." I frowned. "He told you he was not one of the original team but
"was attached to the intel and IT department?" I nodded cautiously, not sure if I should reveal how much I did-or didn't-know. "He's a whizz kid with computers. I'm technically his boss. But in reality, he's my partner in crime!" And he winked conspiratorially.

"What do you mean?" I asked him. He sighed.

"Look, when he came five years ago, he did his computer degree in a year. First Class Honours as well. And a doctorate in under two, fitted around looking after and training Toothless and the others. He's a whizz with computers and a skilled mechanic. He also knows and feels more for the dragons than any of the others. He has a way with them that none of the others approach."

"Wow," I breathed. He smiled at me, the computer scanning traffic cameras faster and faster.

"Ozzie," he introduced himself. "Oswald Oswaldson."

"Really?" I had been wondering if it was a prerequisite of this outfit to have a stupid name. The man grinned easily at me.

"Yeah. My brother, though, got the weird name. Dagur." I stiffened. "Ah. I see you've heard of him."

"He-er-didn't get on with Hiccup?" I attempted. He nodded.

"He is, as you would say, a nut job," he admitted. "Sadly, he's my twin brother as well so I get stuck with the embarrassment of having him as family and having to track him down as a traitor."

"Oswald Oswaldson? REALLY?"

"Hey, Hiccup's got it worse! He's a Third!"

"Third?" I was lost. Was this some foreign naming tradition?

"Yeah," Ozzie told me with a smirk. "Senior, junior and the third. He has two ancestors already called Hiccup Horrendous Haddock." What family of lunatics would use that name ONCE, let alone three times? I was getting more and more concerned that I had left the real world and hopped into the Twilight Zone.

"So the Gods really do officially hate him?" I checked. He grinned and his eyes twinkled. The programme was running and the individual screens were so blurred the shapes couldn't be made out now.

"You have actually spoken to him, then," he realised. I nodded. I could recall every word we shared. "Then you know he's not exactly popular at the moment back in BERK." I nodded again and folded my arms. I knew I shouldn't make judgements but I had spoken to Hiccup and-more importantly-I've seen his wounds.

"Didn't he hide his dragon?" I said as if I've vaguely heard the story. He nodded.

"He stole an irreplaceable piece of biological ordnance!" Stoick growled from the front seat. "So we have a direction yet, Ozzie, or are you going to try to chat Lieutenant Hofferson up some more?"

"Sorry, sir," he said with no evidence of contrition. "They've headed north and taken the main road towards the border. They're heading via Scotch Corner and then up towards Edinburgh." Stock nodded.
"There's your course!" he snapped to Jorgenson, who's in the driver's seat. "Hit it!" We pull away as Ozzie glances back at me and leaned closer.

"He hid Toothless and then he was recaptured," he said quickly, his tone even. "He was interrogated to try to get him to see reason…"

"I saw the scars!" I hissed. He blinked, shocked. He shook his head.

"Oh, no, no, no!" he argued urgently. "The interrogation was entirely conducted in line with UN conventions per operating regulations. We would never…"

"Then how did he get the bruise on his face, his broken ribs, the broken fingers and the whip-marks on his back?" I snapped. I heard the seat in front creak and the General turned to glare at me.

"He wasn't harmed," he insisted. "The bruise on his cheek may have been from when he was captured but the rest…you can't be right…" I took a slow breath: I was breathing hard in anger-on his behalf, I realised. I sighed and fished for my phone, then thumbed through the photos. I flip one up and show it to the General. His eyes widened at the shot of his son's back, the livid weals horribly obvious. He shook his head.

"I saw him," I told him softly and read his shock. He turned to Jorgensen.

"Who ran the interrogation?" he demanded, his gruff voice sharp. The younger man thought for a long moment.

"Dacre and Amund," he reported. "But we all know they were in Dagur's group. They passed the screenings when Dagur, Savage and Vorg deserted. Maybe…they were still batting for the wrong team?" The General sat back and stared at the road as the car accelerated through the traffic and out onto the trunk road.

"Gobber was right," he said softly as they slalomed through the cars. I glanced at Ozzie and noted the confirmed ANPR sightings are being plotted on a map. A new red dot appeared as we watched.

"Hiccup wasn't ever one of the team," he repeated in a low voice. "He was just support staff-and only there because his dad was the head of the whole base. So he was generally treated like an intruder and hardly welcomed. There were a lot of taunts and I know he felt bad and seriously isolated. Gobber and I were the only ones who dealt with him regularly. I am his boss and Gobber knew him from childhood and used to work with him in the mechanical shop." I blinked. "Yeah, he tinkers as well. He designed his damned leg! How's that for talent? But out of the whole damned base, I guess he has only three friends." I raised an eyebrow.

"Three?"

"Gobber, me…and you?" he said with a quirk of his bushy eyebrow. I nodded. Another beep.

"Ozzie?"

"Confirmed. They're on the A1 heading for the border. And we're closing, sir." Stoick leaned forward.

"Catch that car!" he ordered.

oOo

Hiccup regained his senses curled at the back of the van, his left hand tenderly nestled against his
chest. His eyes fluttered but he had long learned to wake quietly, though a hacking cough wracked his aching shape. His messy auburn hair was over his face and he tried not to move as he tried to get his eyes to focus.

His hand was stabbing white-hot pain through the three fingers Dagur had broken, the swollen extremity curled loosely against his chest for protection. Not that Hiccup was in any position to protect anything. His face was battered and bruised, lip split and an eye swelling black. Dagur had hit the prisoner repeatedly, each time sighing over how beautiful Hiccup was looking as the bruises darkened his pale, freckled skin and drew gasps and whimpers of pain from his stubborn mouth. He had been kicked and thrown about-and all for Dagur's sadistic pleasure, because they had admitted they didn't need to torture him to find where Toothless was. He shuddered: they were just torturing him for fun.

Of course, he had far more practice than anyone should have in dealing with being physically abused: a lifetime of being bullied at school had given him too much painful practice in coping with what Dagur had put him through. In BERK, he had been just as isolated, scorned by the riders who rejected him as not being worthy of their friendship-despite accidentally becoming one of them-and by the support staff, because he had become a Rider. In fact, had he not had Gobber and Ozzie, he probably would have run a long time earlier. Only Toothless's needs had kept him suffering in the prison-the hell-that BERK had become.

But now he was a prisoner of Alvin 'the Treacherous' and he had few illusions about how much consideration he would receive. Alvin was a deadly foe-measured, calculating and profoundly sadistic. It had been his orders to his men that had led to Hiccup's torture in BERK, his demands for the dragons that had scared the boy into running with his dragon, his threat to the riders that had Hiccup begging his father to believe him. Dagur had betrayed BERK for Alvin's coin and Hiccup had been the main casualty: abused, threatened, beat up and finally maimed by the deranged Skrill.

He knew he was heading north: he had been listening to them talking for the last ten minutes, still giving no signs that he was conscious. But he could just see the view through the windscreen and he knew they were close to the border. Dagur and Savage were up front as well and Hiccup was alone in the back. And he was right by the back door.

Very slowly, he turned his head until he was looking at the door and he cautiously reached out his intact hand until he felt the metal handle turn in his grasp very slightly. What he was contemplating was insane and dangerous and probably suicidal but he also reckoned it was the best option. So he slid to his knees and wrenched the back door open, thrusting the door away and staring at the cars behind. There was a good gap back to the next car and they were in lane one by the hard shoulder. He exploded into action, scrambling onto the backboard and throwing himself from the van before his captors could even react.
Enter the Dragon

His feet were running before he hit the carriageway and he danced wildly across the asphalt. The wildly flailing arms failed to compensate and he felt the momentum slam him off balance sideways, stumbling across the hard shoulder to the searing scream of a car horn. His legs buckled and he lost his balance, rolling down the slope and landing in a ditch.

The cacophony of horns and scream of tyres up ahead alerted him that his captors had managed to pull to a halt and he desperately scrambled to his feet, erupting from the bush he had landed in and managing a pained, limping run as he sprinted across the marshy field and into a spruce wood that grew mere yards ahead. The firs closed around his lanky and breathless form and another fit of coughing double him up. The cold damp air was playing Hel with his chest. Panicking, he fumbled in his pocket, popped the top of the small plastic bottle and swallowed more antibiotics. He knew intellectually they didn't work like that but he knew his midday dose was overdue and taking them gave him heart. It was the smallest reminder that somebody—even for a couple of days—had cared for him. Then he forced himself upright and ran on.

Every step was agonising, the invisible knives jabbing into his stump where he was pounding the limb. His balance was off, his arms flailing wildly as his good ankle turned on a root and he hit a tree, then went down. Biting his split lip, he dragged himself up and limped on, his ears straining for the sounds of pursuit. He had no clue where he was going, no idea why he decided to run in the middle of nowhere. Desperation, he guessed. Escaping in a town would have been so much better—but the truth was that he had panicked and he had just wanted to get away from Dagur. He paused, listening, and then more slowly, his inch’d through the dense forest. His left hand clutched against his stomach and he leaned against the tree.

His breath was rasping and he failed to suppress a cough. He could hear shouts behind him and he feared he had betrayed himself. Gasping, he staggered forward, his prosthesis catching in a root and dumping him on the muddy ground again. He lay there for a long moment, breathless in the cold mud.

"Where are you, brother?" Dagur shouted, his crazed voice even wilder than usual. He held a large knife in his hands. "You really shouldn't have done that! I may have to teach you a lesson when I get my hands on you!"

Hiccup listened and felt his heart sink: the voice was growing closer. With a groan, he pushed himself up, wincing as he had to use his broken hand. He scrambled up and heard other shouts closing. With a sudden burst of fear, he erupted through the trees, dodging brambles and gorse and frantically scanning for somewhere to hide. The forest stretched into the distance, with no sign of ending. No prospect of help. No way out. In desperation, he threw himself down and rolled back under a dense and prickly gorse, his body almost completely covered.

Shivering, his fist stuffed in his mouth to muffle his coughing, he lay still in the bush, praying they wouldn't find him…

oOo

The car fell silent as we sped north. Ozzie was concentrating on the computer and the General was scowling as he stared aimlessly ahead. Jorgenson was the only one who made any effort at conversation—and it was a particularly crass attempt at chatting me up. Yep—this guy was hitting on me as we tried to rescue Hiccup.
I concentrated on the General and Hiccup's words resonate in my memory.

The single worst father in the history of the world. My father wanted a son like him-and it's really difficult to stand there, staring into his disappointed eyes every single day.

I noticed he didn't seem to be especially worried that his injured, sick son had been kidnapped by people who really didn't mean him well. And he seemed to disbelieve the torments the young man had endured, almost calling him a liar. Calling me a liar. I knew his record, his amazing achievements and citations, his undoubtable valour and the fact that every-every-account says he is loved by his men without hesitation. Yet he seemed to not even care he had a son.

"Hey, babe-you want me to show you around when we get back to base?" Jorgenson's persistence was getting annoying and he was precisely the kind of alpha male overconfident smarmy type I hated.

"I would need to check with my line officer," I replied flatly, glaring daggers at him. I would rather have Hiccup show me around. Please. Ozzie snorted at my side and then he frowned. He checked his camera tracking system.

"They're late," he announced. "They've not hit the next camera at the expected time for maintained speed-or even half speed. And there are no exits. They stopped...there..." He forwarded the location to the Head's-Up Display and the General frowned. I peered over his shoulder. It was just in the middle of fields and countryside. Not even a village or country house nearby.

"There is nothing there," he muttered. He flicks his gaze at Jorgensen. "Can this thing go any faster?" The soldier gave a nasty smile and dropped his foot.

"I was hoping you would ask!" he said.

oOo

It took three quarters of an hour to find Hiccup and drag him back to the van. Savage had no compunction in punching him senseless and dragging the boy back before hog-tying him and getting their driver to floor it. Dagur had been mouthing obscene promises of violence and before everything had melted to black, Hiccup had felt his spine freeze at the violence of the threats: he had no doubt that he would carry them out. It was a grim, grey winter afternoon and no one was looking as two men apparently help their friend into the van. Only a very observant person would notice as they zoomed by at sixty that the 'friend's' head was lolling and his face was covered in bruises.

Hiccup slowly regained consciousness some indeterminate time later in the back of the van, his wrists roped behind his waist and tied loosely to the back of the driver's seat. He wearily raised his head, his vision still spinning gently and his battered face half-covered by his messy auburn locks. He tried to jerk his head and get it off his face but he slumped back, exhausted, as Dagur started to clamber back to speak with him again. The crazed traitor inspected him closely and fisted his hair, dragging his bowed head up and examining the fearful face. He lurched closer.

"I said you would regret running," he breathed. Hiccup stared wide-eyed as the man closed a hand menacingly round his neck. He swallowed painfully and a cough wracked his aching body as Dagur hauled him closer. He found it internally confusing because he hated and feared Dagur with a passion but trusted Ozzie-his almost identical twin brother-with his life. Then Dagur lunged at him, his mouth mashing into Hiccup's and the younger man desperately tried to pull away. Dagur's hand was tightening on his throat and struggled more frantically. Dagur abruptly smashed his head back against the metal back of the seat, the thud echoing loudly through the van. Immediately,
Hiccup's vision smeared with stars and he gasped in shock.

"Leave him," Savage said harshly.

"He's mine!" Dagur snarled. The other man laughed cruelly.

"Alvin wants him intact—for now," he reminded the red-head. "He wants him able to scream and cry for his precious little lizard. But once we have the dragon, Dagur, you're free to torture him as much as you want!" Hiccup's eyes widened in horror at the words and he choked against the vicious grasp around his throat—and then he gasped in relief as the hand was taken away. He sucked air in urgently and immediately started coughing again. Dagur punched him brutally and he slammed into the metal floor.

"You're…never…getting Toothless…" Hiccup wheezed painfully. Dagur slammed a kick into his prone body and he yelped in pain.

"You better start thinking about what I'm gonna do to get that scream…brother!" the red-head said as he slouched back to his seat. Hiccup just lay curled up, shivering in pain—yes, and in fear as well. He saw no way he was getting away again and knew that his only hope was not to make a noise, no matter what they did to him. And he knew that was impossible because he had suffered at Dagur's hands before.

He curled his skinny, lanky body up tighter, his heart pounding in his chest. He had never felt more alone, more hopeless, more useless. But all he could see ahead of him was a horrific litany of torments until loyal, brave Toothless came running to his aid and was taken by Alvin's cruel wranglers. And then...then Dagur would really begin to have his fun with Hiccup. He screwed his eyes closed, burning with misery. He wanted to go home, to be with Toothless.

He wanted Astrid.

And as he thought it, he broke. Silent sobs jerked in his throat, his whole body shuddering with misery. He had only known her for three days and he should really hate her because she had never told him the whole truth about herself. But in all honesty, she was the first person in a long time to treat him like a human being, to treat him with kindness and compassion, rather than hatred and scorn. And though he knew he had to leave because he would put her in danger, he really really wanted to be back in her apartment, feeling her gentle hands stroking his hair or hearing her crisp, caring voice ask if he was feeling okay.

I'm not okay, he thought miserably. Astrid, I'm not okay. I shouldn't have gone. I should have let you explain.

Shuddering with misery, he tucked his head in tighter and just prayed that somehow, he would manage to get away from his captors or Toothless would let him go. But he knew that his bud would never leave him. His final failure would be to cause his friend's capture or death.

He lost track of time, dozing in his misery and pain. Until suddenly, the ride grew bumpy and he yelped as his head banged hard onto the metal before painfully lifting his head once more. The grey light had darkened and the windscreen wipers were smearing freezing rain across the windscreen as they bounced along a poor track. He felt fear clutch his gut and he guessed they were there. And abruptly, they drew to a halt. The engine clicked off—and his captors exploded into action, flinging the doors open and turning to cut Hiccup free and dragging the young man bodily from the van.

As he was thrown out into the horrible afternoon, Hiccup shivered and felt his heart sink to his...
boot: they were back where he had hidden Toothless. How had they known?

*Gods damn it, Ozzie! Why did you have to be so damned good?*

He snapped his head around and his green eyes stared accusingly at the men facing him. It was freezing, the rain had turned to sleet and it was moving towards dusk. There would be no one around and no one would hear them. No one would see them. No one could help him.

He threw himself forward and ran for it, his stump stabbing white-hot needles of pain into his leg. If he could just get away into the gloom, maybe he could get Toothless to free him and then they could go. He wasn't sure where...away was the main imperative. If he headed south, maybe they could get to mainland Europe, perhaps even further south...

He crashed into something huge, bounced off and landed hard on his back, his arms still painfully tied behind his waist. He gave a short scream as his hands—and his broken fingers—took the brunt of the impact. Sprawled on his backside on the frozen, damp ground, he stared up—and up—in horror at the enormous shape facing him, the coal dark eyes, black hair and bushy raven beard familiar from hideous memories and feared nightmares. The scar on the man's cruel face pulled as he fashioned a very menacing leer, causing Hiccup to crawl backwards instinctively.

"'Ello, 'Iccup!" Alvin said.

"Oh, hi, Al," Hiccup said though his voice was too wavery and too scared to give the relaxed impression he was clawing for. He crawled further away until he hit legs and craned his neck up to see Dagur sneering down on him. The deranged traitor grabbed his hair and viciously hauled him to his feet, the low gasp of pain beyond Hiccup's ability to suppress. "F-fancy seeing you here. Thought country walks weren't your thing!" The huge man took a measured and very heavy step towards the struggling Hiccup totally unfazed by the sleet.

"'Gettin' what I want is my thing!" he snarled. "And you 'ave thwarted me for long enough, boy!"

"R-really? I'm just getting started!" Hiccup groaned as Dagur tugged on his hair again. A fist met his back and he exhaled with a pained 'oof!' Alvin tutted in a disappointed voice.

"Vorg-get the sample we need before we start!" he commanded gruffly and a powerful oily-looking man came forward, a briefcase in his hand. He found a nearby bench to lean it on and beckoned them forward. Hiccup was manhandled over and Vorg motioned. Dagur and Savage dragged his hands forward and he began to struggle.

"Dagur-did you break 'is hand again?" Alvin growled. Dagur gave a little giggle.

"I was bored!" he protested, making a pouty face. The effect was very unsettling. Vorg sighed.

"We'll have to use his right hand because his left is too swollen to give a true reading," he growled. Hiccup immediately clenched his right hand into a fist. Savage watched the action and grinned.

"Still the feisty one, eh?" he scoffed, then grabbed Hiccup's in both of his, using his entire strength to try to force the hand open. Hiccup resisted with all his might, his teeth gritted and face locked in effort. Dagur watched him with a delighted smile.

"Let me try!" he offered and closed his hand cruelly over Hiccup's broken fingers. The younger man gave a low cry and stiffened. Dagur squeezed. "Well, brother—you either play along with Savage or I snap these again. Won't that be fun?"

"'m not your brother," Hiccup grunted. "I like your brother. And your sister is pretty cool as well."
But you…" Dagur wrenched his broken fingers back and he groaned. His right hand reluctantly unclenched as he struggled to breathe and a fit of coughing wracked his sagging shape.

"There-told you it was easy," Dagur scoffed. Hiccup's hand was pressed hard onto a palm reader and the device made a hyper-accurate scan of his hand. Vorg stowed the device, then pulled out another machine.

"Eye," he announced. Again, Hiccup screwed his eyes shut until Dagur snapped another finger and then, reluctantly, he opened his eyes. The device was pressed over his wild forest green gaze and he writhed as the brilliant light scanned his iris and retina. The muffled beep and green light showed it had gathered the data it needed. The machine was stowed away. Finally, he grabbed the hand they had scanned and stabbed a device over his thumb, jabbing into the skin and gathering blood for a genetic profile.

"Hey-you could've asked," Hiccup groaned, trying to curl his left hand away from Dagur's menacing grasp. Alvin sneered.

"Done?"

"Yes, Boss," Vorg reported and closed the case. Alvin nodded.

"Back to the plan and my missing alpha dragon," he snarled and scanned the patch of wood they were standing in. "Over there!" he growled, pointing to a flat open piece of land, hard by the loch. Hiccup was dragged, kicking and resisting and thrown onto the damp ground. He rolled and looked up, his bruised face panicked. A fit of coughing doubled him up and when he had finished, Dagur was kneeling by his side, a knife in his hand. Hiccup tried to roll away but Savage was behind him, his hands grasping Hiccup's arms painfully. Alvin paced forward and leaned over the skinny shape, his black eyes boring deep into Hiccup's ashen face.

"He won't come," Hiccup said quietly, his voice hoarse. Alvin laughed at him.

"Of course 'e will!" he sneered. He leaned closer to the trembling boy, watching him hyperventilate. His huge hand caught the bruised face, his thick fingers squeezing into the battered flesh. Hiccup winced. "I'm gonna make yer scream, 'Iccup. See 'ow long 'e can listen to yer screaming yer 'eart out." Hiccup tried to shake his head.

"No," he breathed. Alvin nodded and Dagur grabbed Hiccup's left leg, greedily dragging the jeans leg up past his bony knee, exposing the prosthesis and the scarred stump of his leg. He tried to kick, tried to pull away but Dagur grabbed him hard and twirled the knife menacingly. Hiccup lifted his chin, clenching his jaw and trying, trying with every ounce of his strength to lock his jaws closed. Dagur gave a low chuckle.

"Oh brother," he said in his unsettling tones. "This is just beautiful. And you keep it hidden! All the work of Deathwing, my Skrill-hidden!" His brows dipped. "I think it's time we made it even more lovely!" And he dug his knife into the stump-and twisted.

Hiccup's eyes widened in agony, his neck flung back and neck corded with the effort of not screaming. Tears trickled from his eyes, shamefully streaking his grubby face. Alvin stared at the boy and nodded as Dagur pulled the knife out. Hiccup kept shaking, his jaw clenched and fists so tight his knuckles were white against the skin. Alvin slapped him and he gave a sudden gasp, his eyes closing in shock. Blood was welling from the ragged wound in his supersensitive and already-agonised stump.

"Won't…work…" Hiccup whispered. Alvin laughed.
"I 'eard yer pet 'ad a very sensitive sense of smell, boy!" the arms dealer sneered. "D'you think yer dragon will come to the smell of yer blood?" His huge hand squeezed the stump and Hiccup gave a pained grunt, his back arching in pain. He shook his head stubbornly. Dagur slammed his fist into the boy's chest and he cried out in anguish, another fit of coughing wracking his battered shape. Dagur stabbed his knife again into the stump and this time, Hiccup couldn't resist. His scream echoed across the darkening landscape and across the grey loch. Alvin stared into the ashen, sweat-beaded face and gave a cruel grin.

"Again."

oOo

We bounced up a track, heading into the darkening Scottish countryside, heading for the loch. Ozzie has been crouched over his computer for the last hour, his eyes popping and cursing the fact that the Outcasts (as Alvin's people seem to be referred to) had completely hacked their system. I hung on for dear life, fixing my view on the General, who was sitting serenely as we barrelled into the gloom. Jorgensen seemed to be enjoying the ride, hammering the car and driving like a lunatic. And all the time, he kept hitting on me. I had given him as much encouragement as a rock: did this guy NEVER take the hint?

I noticed that the head's-up overlay had altered and I realised it had changed to an infra-red view. The day looked miserable: the windscreen wiper was swatting the sleet aside and I hung on tighter. Jorgensen skidded round the corner and we fishtailed horribly. Stoick steadied himself with some irritation.

"Is back-up on the way?" he asked brusquely. Ozzie nodded.

"ETA five minutes," he reported.

"Heavyweights?"

"As requested. Fanghook. Barf'n'Belch and Hookfang." I stared at him and he winked. "IR shows seven signatures, four hundred metres ahead. All human."

My ears pricked. What are they expecting? ET? And then I realised: they were expecting Hiccup's dragon, Toothless, to put in an appearance. And the more I thought about it, the more I realised this couldn't end well for him, whichever side won. because he would either remain a prisoner of the Outcasts-or of his own side.

"Get us close, Snotlout!" Stoick snarled, his form suddenly tensing. We slewed in a half-spin and the team all burst from the car. I jumped out after them and the General glared at me. "Stay in the car, Lieutenant. You're not experienced enough to get involved-and this is likely to get dirty."

"Accepted, sir-but I am the only qualified medical officer," she shot back at him. "Hiccup's ill and I guess he's hurt as well. Can any of you administer proper trauma first response?" He stared at me, shocked at my boldness. In truth, so was I. I wiped the sleet out of my eyes and met his gaze levelly and he nodded. "Stay behind us," he ordered and motioned the others on. I was astonished to see Ozzie draw a pistol as well. Stoick and Jorgensen were leading, both poised and quick.

And then we heard the scream. I shuddered. It was Hiccup and he sounded in agony. I glanced at Ozzie and he grasped his weapon tighter. Stoick accelerated to a run and we ran towards the sounds. My heart was pounding in my chest and I automatically recalled what I did in Boot and Sandhurst. I had an excellent firearm rating as well and have performed well on exercises. But I stayed back because I was not armed and I was worried as another heart-rending scream echoed.
We were closing and I could hear sounds of voices, snarling a question. We got even closer and I saw Hiccup being held up, two men leaning over him. One was huge and the other looked very like Ozzie: it had to be Dagur. But my mouth dropped open as I saw he was holding a knife red with blood. Then I saw blood all over Hiccup's bad leg and I almost lurched forward but I managed control myself-barely.

"Seven," Jorgensen murmured. "I see four. Where are the other three?" Stoick hunkered down and gestured crisply. The others Outcasts were armed at the perimeter of the clearing, weapons raised. Dagur leaned forward and I saw the knife flash.

"C'mon, boy," a gruff, cruel voice sneered. "Your little pet can't 'ear yer!"

Hiccup screamed.

Shocked, I saw Stoick flinch and I realised then that he did care for the boy—he was just utterly incapable of showing it. But he leaned forward and growled "Alvin…"

And then we all froze as a shattering roar echoed all around us and, out of the gloom and the sleet, a black shape slowly advanced…
Saving Hiccup

My eyes widened as I realised what I was seeing. The creature was sleek, streamlined and alien, the large acid-green eyes almost glowing with slitted pupils. It was completely black with enormous bat wings, half unfurled. The blunt head was vertically flattened with ears flicked backwards and a lithe, strong body on four sturdy legs. The long tail was flicking with one fin apparently made of red material. It was a dragon.

It was Toothless.

Hiccup screamed more desperately. "Toothless-NO! Get away, bud!" And Dagur twisted the knife, drawing another pained scream from him. I flinched and almost jerked forward, but I could see the dragon had his eyes locked on the men torturing his friend. A low growl began to rumble in his throat and he advanced inexorably, every motion balanced and oozing hunter's poise. His head lowered and the growl grew louder.

The other concealed men were here to subdue and capture him, I realised. And then something snapped inside me, a burning desire not to let these people who had scared and tormented Hiccup get their hands on the creature he had risked so much for. I dashed to one side, towards the nearest one of them. Ozzie glanced after me and opened his mouth to call me back but I ducked behind the bushes as the roar echoed through the whole glen. The gloom was like a blanket now and I could barely see, especially in the shadow of the trees. The Outcast didn't see me at all as I spun him, my foot slamming up and hitting him squarely in the solar plexus. I followed with another kick to the groin and then, as he doubled up, the chin. I threw him and a swift kick across the face finished him off. I ducked down to snatch his weapon and dived back under cover. The others focussed their weapons on the dragon and Hiccup wildly kicked out with his normal leg, catching Dagur across the face. Alvin dealt him a brutal punch and he sagged.

"NOW!" Alvin roared and his men focussed on the Night Fury but the black dragon was fast, leaping aside and swiping one man heavily with his tail. He flew across the ground and hit a tree, then landed and lay still. The hiss of tranquilliser bullets sounded but the dragon was quick. Toothless roared again, a purplish glow suddenly filling his maw and blasting away at the third man hiding on the perimeter. Then the dragon turned on the huge arms dealer and his prisoner. Suddenly, there was a knife at Hiccup's throat and the others turned to the dragon, their weapons raised. My eyes widened: I had no clue what to do and I slank back to the rest of the BERK team. Stoick scowled but his wristwatch flashed suddenly and he gave a grim smile.

"The cavalry has arrived," he announced and nodded to Jorgensen. The man gave a grin and ran back from the clearing as the whooshing of wings sounded behind us. I half-turned…to see a huge, red and brown dragon briefly touch down to allow Jorgensen to leap aboard his neck. The creature was nowhere near as sleek or impressive as the Night Fury, his horns and spiky skin more menacing. Jorgensen pumped his arm in the air.

"Snotlout! Snotlout! Oi! Oi! Oi!" he shouted as he soared into the air. Simultaneously a cloud of green gas coiled to the far side of the clearing and then exploded, as another dragon whooshed overhead with two voices screaming obscenities and laughing. Alvin leaned closer to Hiccup and grabbed his hair, pulling the bleeding man hard against his chest.

"Back off-or little 'Iccup 'ere loses more than 'is leg!" he snarled. Stoick lifted his chin.

"Give up, Alvin-you're surrounded!" he shouted back.
"Then we are at an impasse!" the arms dealer snarled. "Except I 'ave another ten men closing on us now. Did yer think I'd just bring me driver and put the dragon in me trunk? I just want the Night Fury, Stoick! And you can 'ave your runt of a boy back!" Stoick's silence spoke volumes. Hiccup's head lolled.

"Go, bud!" he rasped and the dragon gave a worried croon, freezing at the sight of his rider in such a state. I raised my stolen weapon and aimed at Alvin. Ozzie reached out and grasped the barrel, forcing my weapon down and shaking his head.

"Wait!" he hissed. I frowned and he levelled his own weapon at the arms dealer. "Alvin always brings men and relies on brute force. But his plans are terrible! In the last few missions, Hiccup has bested him every time. Something must have really spooked him to make him leave BERK." I leaned closer, still not understanding.

"Hiccup?" Ozzie nodded, never taking his eyes from the standoff.

"He rides the Night Fury, the leader of the dragons," he explained shortly. "But he's a pretty good leader as well!" My silence caused him to flick an amused glance back to inspect my shocked face. "Don't let his lack of confidence and appearance fool you. Once he's with Toothless, he can be himself. And who Hiccup really is... well, he's pretty amazing. Despite the fact the other riders are absolutely bastards to him, they respect him once they're in the air. It's just... he suffers for everything else."

"I'm waiting, Stoick!" Alvin snarled, digging the blade deeper into Hiccup's throat. "See, boy? Yer father just don't seem to appreciate yer talents enough to hand over yer reptile..."

Toothless roared again and I could vaguely hear Jorgensen still whooping overhead, mixed with the roars of the dragons. Did this guy NEVER shut up? The standoff had the loch at the Outcasts' back and the knowledge of Alvin's reinforcements closing in the gathering gloom was making my pulse race. I leaned closer to the General.

"Sir? Do all those dragons breathe fire?" I asked in a low voice.

"Lieutenant..." he growled, not even looking at me.

"All of them," Ozzie murmured. "Practically a qualification for being a dragon, actually..."

"The Loch," I suggested. "Fire and water equals steam. Explosively. Might that even the odds?" Stoick stiffened, then gave a sharp nod and murmured rapidly into his wrist-com. I heard roars and then against the fading skyline, I saw two shapes swoop down low over the loch. I could see the orange and brown outline of Jorgensen's dragon and a purple and brown version with another rider on, flying in formation. The two dragons burst into flame and raked the shore and shallows behind the Outcasts with a huge wall of fire. The results were spectacular and the explosion of fire meeting ice-cold water blew Alvin, Hiccup and the Outcasts across the sleet-covered ground. Three trees had burst into flames as well, illuminating the scene with a warm and uneven light.

Toothless roared and fired his purple blast at Alvin, tossing the huge man back a handful of yards. Instantly, he was on his feet but Hiccup had moved as well, his battered scarecrow shape staggering to his shaky feet and throwing himself the three limping steps forward to lurch onto the black dragon. He managed a slumping seat on the dragon's neck and I realised there was a fitted saddle and pedals.

"STOP HIM!" Dagur shouted and levelled his pistol at Hiccup.
The crack of a gun firing sounded, followed by a hail of shots. Toothless whipped up his wing, shielding the sagging figure and the shots bounced away. I gaped. What the hell were these creatures made of? It didn't seem possible! Ozzie and the General unleashed a volley at the Outcasts and in that moment, the dragon lowered his wing and began to fidget as the wings unfurled for takeoff. Hiccup was almost doubled up and he looked on the brink of collapse, his broken left hand trying to curl around the lip of the saddle by his right. He grimaced obviously. Snapping off a couple of shots at the Outcasts, who were hunkering down behind a large chunk of mottled grey granite, I dashed forward, my eyes locked on him as the dragons came round and strafed the Outcasts again. The explosions of the dragons' attack drowned out the snap of gunfire as the Outcasts fired back, the bullets cracking and zinging in the twilight.

"C'mon, bud," Hiccup rasped and the red artificial tail fin gently opened. I guessed he was trying to fly away but I grabbed his hand and pulled him to look at me.

"HICCUP!" I shouted. His eyes widened at seeing me and I read pain and betrayal in his deep gaze. He shook his head. "WAIT!"

"I have to go," he rasped. He looked dreadful and was breathing hard.

"You'll die!" I shouted at him, not letting go. I couldn't let him go! "You'll bleed out. Your leg is pumping blood! You have to let me help you!" His eyes narrowed and he looked angry.

"Why?" he manages. "So you can betray me again?"

"I didn't!" I protested, my chest contracting to a fist of pain and hurt. How could he think that? "I never betrayed you! They found me!"

"And you forgot to mention you were army?" he hissed. He looked very hurt and very alone.

"You ran away!" I retorted. "How the hell could I tell you if you weren't there?" His left lower leg and prosthesis were slick with blood and it was dripping onto the ground. He pulled his hand away from mine.

"I can't let them get him!" he rasped and took a shuddering breath. I looked at him helplessly-and then I appealed for support to the one person he had spoken of with love. I knew the dragon was very intelligent. "TOOTHLESS! Don't take him. He'll die! He needs help! STOP!"

The dragon's ears twitched: he lifted his flattened, blunt head and inspected me in shock. He could hear the concern in my unfamiliar voice and he could smell blood and probably hear Hiccup's heart racing. He sniffed and stared at me again. Then he lowered his wings then gave a worried croon that had Hiccup giving a groan at his stubbornness.

"Thanks for nothing, you useless reptile," he gasped as Stoick raised his weapon and fired. Toothless roared as a red dart impacted into his neck. The General fired three more times and each time, the darts hit the dragon. He gave one more roar, then folded, his eyes closing as he collapsed, unconscious. I stared in shock and then burst into action, dragging Hiccup from the dragon's back and ripping off my belt, tightening it brutally just above his left knee, forming a rudimentary tourniquet. He struggled feebly but I could tell his fight was gone: despite everything, Toothless was taken. Explosions sounded behind me as the dragon riders kept the Outcasts at bay. Hiccup's hands closed over mine, his bleary green eyes dark with pain and betrayal. His head rocked to the side to look at his dragon and his eyes shone.

"I'm sorry, bud," he murmured and there was shame in his voice. Then his eyes closed and he went limp. I looked up at the General.
"He needs medical care-now!" I insisted. Shots started to sound from behind us: Alvin's reinforcements were arriving. Stoick snapped his head round, pouring rounds at the pinned down Outcast leader.

"Back at the base!" he growled. "Stabilise him. There's a kit in the car. Snotlout-take Toothless!"

"How long to the base?" I asked, checking his pulse. Weak and too fast. He was cold, too. Stoick nodded to Ozzie, then lifted the lanky shape in his arms surprisingly gently.

"About half an hour by air," he explained, opening the car and sliding his unconscious son onto the back seat. He fetched the medical kit from the boot and handed it to me, then settled back in his seat in the front. Ozzie dived into the driver's seat and fastened his seatbelt. I settled by Hiccup as the doors slammed closed and the locks clicked down. The General clicked his wrist-com again: "Gustav, Thorstons-get us back to base. Fast!" And then the whole car lurched and we rose from the ground, flying up into the rapidly falling night, over the loch. Bullets zinged around us and I threw myself across Hiccup but as we lurched up, they faded. The motion was jerky and I peered up out of the window to see wings dipping in and out of view. With a shock, I realised we are being carried by a dragon. Up ahead, I could see the orange and brown shape of Jorgensen's dragon, with Toothless hanging unconscious from his paws. I blinked and dragged myself back to reality.

My training kicked in. I'd always focussed on trauma because I knew for sure that's where I was going to end up. I'd already got ALS and ATLS even before my Finals and I'd done loads of extra shifts in the ED to get my competences up. So I worked through his assessment, checking the airway, pressing an oxygen mask against his battered face and flipping on the valve. Then I lifted him up and dragged off his leather jacket and shirt. I didn't want to wreck everything he has because something told me he didn't actually have that much to call his own. I found the vein and inserted a line, running fluids in fast to replace some of the blood he'd lost. Then I turned to his leg and I snatched the scissors from the kit, cutting his jeans off.

I was peripherally unaware that Stoick was watching me closely, noting my calm and precise movements as I investigated the hideous ragged stab wounds in his stump and I winced. I knew how sensitive the area was and these must have been agonising. I found a flash light and focussed it on the wounds, seeing one pumping blood. Must've got one of the arteries, I thought idly, gloving and grabbing a suture and needle-holder. Pretty close to the trifurcation… With care, I looped a stitch around the pumping vessel. When I eased the tourniquet, blood flowed freely still, so I tightened it again and put a couple more stitches in. When I checked this time, the vessel was dry but there was another in the other horrid ragged hole. After I stitched that, there was just the standard ooze from rent muscle and skin, so I sloshed antiseptic cleaning solution into the wounds and packed them with alginate haemostat. Then I bandaged the leg and belatedly, grabbed a syringe of painkiller, stabbing it into his thigh and emptying the lot into his scrawny shape. Breathing hard, I looked up.

The General gave me a small smile, his eyes dark with concern. "Hmm," he murmured. "I think we may have made a good choice. I'll radio ahead to Gothi." And he turned away. I wonder if that's as approving as he gets but then I recalled Hiccup's words and sighed: I guessed I'd had more praise than he ever received. Turning back, I lifted the stethoscope—one of those cheap ones, not like my beautiful Cardiology model, and listened to his chest. Despite the beating he'd taken, there was no more damage, just bruising. He still had signs of a chest infection but it sounded better than when I had sneaked a quick listen as he lay unconscious in my apartment. With a satisfied nod, I stowed the instrument again. Then I turned back and tenderly stroked his soft auburn hair off his face, then wrapped a space blanket over him to try to conserve his heat. I laid his jacket over him as well and stared ahead into the night.
We were moving surprisingly fast and over a lot of geography. Mountains, glens, lochs and burns all rolled away under us, almost unseen in the sleety night. The clouds were low and it felt almost claustrophobic as we surged forward. I reckoned we must have headed directly north and were somewhere in the Highlands. There were no lights, no signs of civilisation at all and no real prospects of accidentally being seen. Then we began to dip and I hung onto Hiccup as the ride became more jerky and the ground flew up at us. I may have given a little shriek and closed my eyes as we suddenly dived into the side of the mountain and the night vanished behind us. We soared into a huge, brilliantly-lit cavern and the car landed with a gentle thump. Ozzie checked the brakes and two dragons landed in front of us.

I stared: I couldn't help it. One was the purple and tan version of Jorgensen's horned and spiky dragon, strutting proudly with its young rider laughing and fussing his friend while the other was even more extraordinary: it had two heads. The large green body with four strong legs and twin tails led to two serpentine necks with small rounded heads, each with a horn on the nose. The two riders were high up the neck, shouting and bantering spiritedly. I could see a strong resemblance between them and guessed a dragon like that needed two people who could almost read each other's minds.

The door opened and Stoick roared for the medics. I scrambled out of the way, as the team raced forward and dragged Hiccup from the car seat. He remained unconscious but his IV was running, he had oxygen and his leg had ceased leaking for the moment. I waited until they had him on the gurney before I leaned forward and rested my hands on the edge, claiming my spot as his attendant and preparing to give handover to the senior in charge. The team looked at me, then nodded in acceptance: medics were always pretty quick to accept another professional.

"Go with them!" Stoick said quietly. "Ozzie will handle your things." Then he turned away to talk to a short but still hefty man, an older image of Jorgensen. The gurney began to move and I stared down at Hiccup, breathing quietly and painfully bruised. And then it finally hit me.

I had arrived in BERK.
I decided that BERK may be an astonishing project but most of the people were downright rude. I have been here for five days already and the only people who have spoken to me are the rest of the medical team in the infirmary and Gobber, who has been put in charge of my supervision and orientation.

The infirmary was amazing, I had to admit. It was equipped like a major trauma unit with every cutting edge technique, device and drug out there stocked and available. Major Gothi, the senior officer, was a tiny woman in her sixties who couldn't speak and used a device strapped to her forearm to translate her wishes in an eerie electronic voice. She had already reviewed my records from the Medical School and appraised my report and work on Hiccup with a wry smile and a single nod. I translated that as 'acceptable' and decided that I needed to work harder to impress her. She had contacted my Dean and insisted that they forward my Finals papers here so that I can take them early as I will be 'in Theatre' at the time of the actual exams. Meaning I will be incommunicado in BERK so they wanted my degree finished ASAP.

The nurses and paramedical staff were just as professional, all career soldiers and experienced, hand-picked for the mission with no ties or family who would miss them. I was far and away the youngest and least experienced but amazingly, Gothi took me under her wing and started to give me personal tutorials in management of every possible trauma emergency to get me up to speed. I was given access to all online resources and started putting in hours after my shift to build on my knowledge. I wanted desperately to prove I am worth keeping here.

I was not assigned to look after Hiccup. Gothi took a personal interest in him-maybe because she had saved his life before and so was very familiar with his records. I did get reports from her because she could tell I wanted to know how he was doing. Her eyes twinkled as she reported and I could tell she was thinking that I had feelings for him. Which was all very true but I had no idea now what he thought of me. And, to be honest, I was not completely sure what to think of him any more either. He must have poked around my personal belongings or computer to find out about my army background. And while I supposed I could understand why he did it, I was not sure I could forgive him for doing it.

I have been assigned a neat room which wasn't a patch on my apartment but which was far better than anything I have been assigned before. I made sure when I unpacked that I had all my pictures of my family on show. I wasn't sure what Mum, Dad or Gran would have made of all this, but I hoped they'd be proud. After all, I've stumbled in on something extraordinary and have already saved a life: I just need to make myself feel at home here. I visited the gym and ran around the track they had bored into the mountain but it really wasn't not the same. I missed popping out for a coffee or idly sitting by the old docks and watching the gulls squabble over a left-over kebab or pizza. I was suddenly struck how far away from the real world I was.

Everyone in the base wore uniform: usually fatigues of a pale green khaki. As Medical, my shoulder-flash was cherry-red and dark blue: almost the colours of the RAMC with my rank of lieutenant displayed. I had an ID badge with a stern looking picture of me and my clearance (standard support level). I had already had my handprint and retinal and iris scans logged. The other staff groupings had their own different identifiers: Riders were brown; IT green; domestic staff light blue; other support orange, scientific and technical white, MPs bright red and command gold.

Lunchtime found me in the mess hall, staring at my tray. The food here was pretty good, to be fair.
Napoleon always said an army marches on its stomach and in BERK, no one starved. Maybe it was compensation for our isolation. I'd already realised I'd just have to hit the gym harder to make sure I didn't develop a waist like a barrel. But I was sitting alone, poking my food with a fork and carving patterns in my mash. The Riders all sat together, laughing raucously and clearly enjoying their hallowed status. Jorgensen junior (yes, there were two of them, father and son) had kept up his pursuit of me and I just as determinedly kept ignoring him. I supposed I could have just punched him out if he couldn't get the message, but that might be considered a wee bit drastic for my first few days. Maybe I should wait until I've been here at least a week.

None of the other support staff would give me the time of day either. They didn't know me so they didn't care. It was very different to any camp or mission I had been on when camaraderie was the order of the day. Here, people were much more stuck in their silos. I sighed. Maybe this hadn't been a great idea after all. Maybe I had trapped myself in the middle of nowhere in a situation where all I was going to be was an assistant to a mute elderly and very odd medic. I shook my head and drew a swirl pattern in my mash then smoothed it out. Then as I was beginning a new pattern, I heard a chorus of jeers and taunts and I glanced up to see Hiccup limp painfully into the mess hall.

He was the only person in the base I'd seen out of uniform—well, he had insisted to me that he wasn't military—so he stood out like a sore thumb in his faded jeans, check shirt and scuffed boot in a room of soldiers in fatigues. He'd got crutches because his patched and bandaged left leg couldn't take the pressure from his prosthesis for the moment, despite the fact he had insisted on wearing his prosthesis anyway. It was clearly a stubbornness thing because I knew that Gothi had argued with him about leaving it off to allow the wounds to heal better. I watched him very awkwardly collect a tray and shamble towards the tables. The Riders fired a stream of jeers at him and his emerald eyes glanced at the vacant tables. He saw me—then veered away and sat as far as he could from both me and the Riders.

I stared at him and felt a cold weight land on my stomach. He really couldn't have made it plainer: he wanted nothing to do with me. He sat with a wince and almost dropped his tray, his gravy spilling off his plate. He laid his crutches aside and grabbed a fork then stabbed some meat and took a bite. He still looked ghastly but as I watched, he fumbled in his pocket and drew out something which made my heart jump: it was a small plastic pot that contained the antibiotics I had given him. Despite everything, he had kept them! Automatically, he shook one into his hand and chucked it into his mouth, taking a slurp of water to down it.

I glared at my plate for a long moment: Hiccup was literally the only person I knew here and I wasn't letting him get away with ignoring me after everything I had done for him. I rose, grabbed my tray and pointedly walked over to sit opposite him, putting my tray down just hard enough so he could tell I was annoyed. He looked up at me and his green eyes were less than welcoming. He took a deep breath: he clearly didn't want to move because it almost certainly hurt him to get around. "Hello, Astrid," he said tonelessly.

"We need to talk," I told him bluntly. He nodded and stared at his food. I got the impression he had just lost his appetite and there was real disappointment and anger in his face.

"About what?" he asked biting.

"Oh, let me guess—you sneaking through my personal belongings, computer, that sort of thing?" I said, deciding to go on the attack first. His eyes widened: clearly he saw himself as the wronged party in this. He never considered I might have been at all hurt as well.

"I..." he began then stopped. He seemed to be an honest enough person to have admitted he may
have betrayed my trust. "You weren't password protected," he added softly. I could feel my eyes narrow at the words. *Lame.*

"What?" I spat. "I take a huge chance for you. I pick you up from the floor of an alley. You could be a junkie or a drunk or anything. I could end up murdered in my bed but I give you the benefit of the doubt anyway because you need my help and you look so alone and so scared and so damned pathetic. You refuse to go to hospital despite clearly needing hospital care for life-threatening infection. You give me a ludicrous name, a frankly impossible story and are clearly in big trouble with someone. You are only just getting better and on the first day your fever is properly down, you run away! How am I supposed to tell you anything?" He blinked, his expression shocked at my venom.

"And you couldn't possible drop a hint?" he asked sarcastically. "Oh, by the way, I'm a soldier?"

"And when exactly would you have liked me to do that?" I shot back, bristling with anger but trying to keep my voice down. "While you were having all those nightmares? When your fever was so high all you could do was sleep? When you threw up? When I needed to help you to the bathroom? When?"

"When I was feeling better," he said shortly. His fists were clenched.

"You mean when you told me about Toothless and how badly you were treated here, how you didn't trust the military at all?" I asked him pointedly. "I wanted to think how to tell you because you looked so scared. You had clearly suffered a lot of cruel treatment. And I didn't want you to be so scared of me you felt you had to leave even when you were still really sick when I had nothing to do with any of the people who had hurt you." I sighed and the anger left me. "I joined the army a long time ago because I wanted to make a difference. They funded my medical training. My future is in the Royal Army Medical Corps as an army doctor-a trauma specialist, I think. I wanted adventure and excitement and I organised my life to enable that. My parents and family all supported me-and they're all gone." I stopped again as he winced: he hadn't discovered that little fact. And I almost cringed: this was going to sound pathetic.

"It was kinda nice, even for a couple of days, to have someone there," I added softly. "To be able to talk to someone, to care for someone without them being just a patient or a colleague." He paused. "I don't have any family. My friends all graduated and moved away. I live alone. What part of having another human being there wouldn't be enjoyable? And talking with someone who didn't know everything about me, from my middle name to my military record was just even better!"

"Well, that part was true, Lieutenant," he snapped, sarcastically. I had forgotten his sarcasm. It was cute when he was ill but downright irritating at this moment. "I doubt I knew anything about you at all."

"Oh, for the love of…" I growled. "Baby-boo! So they found you! I didn't contact them. I came with them when they came because I wanted to help. I wanted to see you were safe. I wanted to see you again!" I paused and had to own up. "I was falling for you, alright? I didn't want to scare you away because I really really didn't want you to go!"

He stared at me, his eyes wide with shock. I was suddenly reminded of the cute, charming, self-deprecating man who had eaten my horrible breakfasts and let me look after him. He ran his right hand nervously through his hair-his left was heavily bandaged-and he suddenly looked embarrassed.

"You-you…what?" he said, his composure leaving him totally. I sighed.
"I was falling for you, okay?" I repeated irritably. He suddenly gave a slight, shy smile, as if I had just said something magical and utterly improbable.

"Couldn't resist all the raw Vikingness?" he asked tentatively, his eyes suddenly hopeful.

"Tried my hardest," I teased him. He was really not looking his best: hair unruly, black eye, split lip, bruised neck, bruised face, bandaged hand and leg, crutches and even skinnier than he had been while staying with me. But his sparkling, heart-stopping green eyes, kind slightly freckled face and auburn mop actually hit all my buttons. "I didn't lie to you, Hiccup. I never meant to hurt or betray you. I just didn't know how to tell you." He gave a sad nod.

"I trusted you," he told me gently, his tone still mildly hurt. "I-I don't trust easily because I haven't had anyone to trust. And those I should trust have usually let me down!" I stared at him and he seemed to sag in the seat. "My Dad, for example. Someone who should trust me and believe me. He never believes anything I say and always believes other people over me. Snotlout…" I pulled a face and he cracked a small, pained grin.

"Yuk," I offered.

"…my cousin," he continued. My eyes widened. "…is my biggest bully. Always has been. He'd step over me if I fell down-and probably kick me on the way past. Fishlegs used to be my best friend but when he was told to make a choice, he chose them, not me." He sighed miserably.

"Hiccup, I…" I didn't know what to say. I realised he must have felt horribly hurt, even though I had never done anything intentionally to hurt him. I had never meant to deceive him: I had really just needed some time to work out how to tell him what I knew he would hate about me.

"You came back for me," he said so quietly I almost didn't hear. "You saved my life. And Toothless trusted you-which is a pretty good endorsement." I smiled.

"He's actually pretty cool," I admitted. "But why does he have a red tail fin?" He winced.

"Erm, he lost his tail in a fight with Dagur's Skrill, a while before he betrayed us," he admitted. "I was being targeted by Dagur even then and it attacked me during a training exercise. I worked with Gobber to build him a prosthetic tail and gearing mechanism. He needs me to fly now-which makes me feel worse. But we've practiced so much he's as good as he was before. Obviously, I had to modify it when I lost my own leg…" And he grimaced. I reached across and caught his unbroken hand.

"That's pretty brilliant," I assured him, impressed at his determination. "Building a prosthetic tail for an extinct creature. Helping him fly again! I don't know anyone who could manage that!" He raised his eyes and I saw his chronic lack of self-confidence. He shrugged.

"He's my best friend," he admitted. "And I would…"

"Hey-is this loser bothering you, babe?" a familiar voice asked as Snotlout Jorgensen (aka Jorgensen the younger) drifted over to the table. I glanced up at him in exasperation. Hiccup seemed to fold in on himself, his head bowing and shoulders hunching.

"One thing is bothering me but it's not Hiccup," I replied tartly. He narrowed his eyes and then I saw a flash of the other side of Snotlout: the mean, cruel, ruthless opponent and I felt my hackles rise. Then he turned his attentions onto Hiccup and the tone was colder, crueler.

"Hello, Useless," he sneered. I frowned: that was an amazingly cold thing to say to someone.
"Hey, Snotface," Hiccup said, lifting his head and forcing a false smile on his face. Clearly, he had become used to this.

"Keep away from her!" Snotlout hissed. "You think anyone wants anything to do with a traitor like you? Especially when she can have someone like me?" Hiccup winced.

"Actually, I seemed to remember you were best buddies with Dagur, not me," he shot back, his tone growing harder.

"So what do you call stealing Toothless?" Snotlout sneered. Hiccup's eyes hardened.

"Protecting my best friend."

"How? By nearly getting him captured by Alvin? You really are utterly useless, you know?"

"If security in this place wasn't like a sieve, then no one would have found him!" Hiccup snapped, his fists bunching. "They got the damned tip off from here!" Snotlout laughed at him.

"You are so pathetic!" he sneered. "You get yourself captured because you stole Toothless and ran away and suddenly it's BERK's fault! You manage to screw everything up and as usual, we have to clear up after you!" Hiccup took a couple of angry breaths.

"And what precisely did I screw up?" he snapped.

"Let me think? Starting with being born…" Snotlout sneered.

"Boring!" Hiccup shot back doing a passable impression of Dagur.

"Or gate-crashing the hatching and stealing Toothless?" Hiccup shoved himself to his feet, supporting his weight entirely on his right leg and his hands. He glared ferociously at Snotlout.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" he said in a low, dangerous voice. Hiccup was pretty impressive when angry and with his flashing eyes and pulled up to his full height, he's hot. Though about a third as wide as Snotlout was.

"Meaning he is the leading dragon and he should clearly have been mine!" Snotlout sneered.

"Y'know, I think I heard that from Dagur as well-as he tried to punch me through a wall!" Hiccup snapped back, his eyes glittering.

"Dagur? I'm clearly the best Rider in the whole programme!" Snotlout snorted with almost certain self-delusion. "Why would a dragon choose anyone but me. I mean-look at all this!" And he gestured vainly to himself.

"And my lunch is in my throat," Hiccup growled. "You really are deluded if you think…"

"Hiccup-Toothless was meant for ME!" Snotlout's complete self-confidence silenced the entire mess. I cringed at all the eyes on the table as the two men glared at one another.

"Why?" Hiccup retorted. "He's the most intelligent and powerful dragon with an excellent sense of smell. You...you have the biggest ego, the lowest IQ and the lowest bath to age ratio. Which of those d'you think would appeal to a Night Fury?"

"I can still pound you into a bloody puddle on the floor!" Snotlout menaced, curling his fist. Hiccup rolled his expressive eyes.
"And the argument goes to—Hiccup!" he announced in a weary voice. "Your answer to everything is to hit me! But that's why you're never going to be a good leader. You have no comprehension of anything other than plan A: go in all guns blazing! And that is why you'd get us all killed in ten damned seconds!"

"Hey—I saved your skinny little ass!" Snotlout shouted at him. Hiccup glared back at him.

"Way I heard it, Astrid came up with the plan and all you and Gustav did was what you normally do—barrel in at full speed and blow something up!" he shouted back.

"While you were crying and whining and getting your ass whipped by Alvin and Dagur!" Snotlout sneered, his face ugly. "I heard Dagur has a thing for you, Hiccup!" And the way Snotlout said his name clearly made both Hiccup's and my flesh crawl. "I'll bet he couldn't keep his hands off you, could he?" Hiccup stiffened for just a moment and his green eyes flared with definite fear. Not the right thing to show at this moment. Snotlout's expression became even less attractive as he recognised the weakness. "Did he give his ickle girlfriend a kiss? Or perhaps he just wanted to…"

"Snotlout, say one more word and I swear to Odin…" Hiccup snarled and Snotlout grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him off his feet. Hiccup groaned: his broken ribs were pretty sore and most of him was battered and bruised. Snotlout cocked back his fist and Hiccup closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. I'd had enough of this.

"Hey, lover-boy!" I said and he looked round to me. Guess it's gonna be a short week. And I punched him hard in the face.

Hiccup collapsed back onto his chair, Snotlout went down like a sack of potatoes and I grasped my hand and cursed. That really hurt! Snotlout was lying on his back, holding his bleeding nose and whining. "Ooo dunched ee…" he said unintelligibly, looking amazed.

"Whoops," I said with a grin. "My hand must have slipped." Hiccup glanced up at me and I saw a mix of shock, relief and anxiety in his expression. "You okay?" I whispered. He nodded.

"You punched me!" Snotlout said more loudly.

"Bravo." My voice was sarcastic.

"You punched me?" His voice was astonished and disbelieving. I leaned closer to Hiccup.

"Is he really that stupid?" I asked him in a low voice. He nodded.

"Yeah," he admitted. "But he bears a grudge. And has an ego larger than anyone's I ever met. Oh and the bath thing…" My nose wrinkled.

"Got it," I reassured him. He was clearly very unnerved. "You okay?" I repeated. He nodded slightly.

"He…er…used to beat me up when I was a kid," he admitted in a shamed whisper. "I-I guess I'm not feeling too confident at fighting him off at the moment."

God, could his life get more miserable? Though it would explain his abysmal and utter lack of self-confidence.

"No need—I'll beat him up for you until you're back on your feet," I volunteered with a smile. Snotlout clambered to his feet and glared at me but I tossed an equally unpleasant one of my own back in return. He cast one nasty shot as he slouched off, pressing a handful of paper napkins to his
bleeding nose.

"No need to look so smug, Useless!" he snarled. "Didn't they tell you? Even when your leg is better-hah!-your flight privileges have been revoked! You don't get to see your dragon!"

Hiccup flinched as if he had been slapped in the face and I stared at him. He had gone bone white and he looked horrified. "No," he breathed. "He...he can't..." And he shoved himself onto his foot and grabbed his crutches. Then he dashed for the door. I grabbed our trays, shoved them in the dirty crockery trolleys and ran after him. I caught up with him halfway up the main corridor and I had to grab his arms to slow him down. For a skinny and battered guy, he could sure put one turn of speed on--and it hit me. He'd used crutches before. A lot--probably when he originally lost his leg. No one could get this good this quickly otherwise.

"Slow down!" I said but he shook his head. His eyes were dark with disappointment and more--that look of betrayal was there, brighter than before. I hated to see his open face disfigured by that look. "Where are you going?" He finally stared at me, the intensity in his expression unfamiliar.

"To see my Dad!" he admitted at last. He was breathing hard and deep in the glorious green of his eyes, I saw anger. "He can't stop Toothless flying. It's...it's inhumane!"

"I don't think he'll listen," I found myself saying. From what I'd observed, Stoick wasn't a man to be moved easily by emotional pleas. And he was very angry at his son for his flight. Hiccup sighed.

"Yeah, kinda learned that over the years," he murmured but the determined look was still on his face and I nodded. "Stay here, Astrid. He's not gonna be happy and he should carry on being unhappy at me." He gave small smile, enough to send a flutter through my chest. "What more can he do to me? Lock me up? Firing squad?" Then he turned away and vanished down the corridor. I stared after him. I had a bad feeling about this.
I found myself worrying about Hiccup in the infirmary as I ran through several simulations and passed them all. Major Gothi seemed satisfied with my performance though my appraisal feedback forms all have points for improvement. I won't be satisfied until there is nothing that can be improved upon. But they were generous with their time and seemed willing to put the time into my education before all Hell breaks loose. I should have be grateful but I really found myself wondering what happened.

Once I finished my shift, I hit the gym for my session and then I started worrying about Hiccup again. I knew it was stupid and he'd managed to survive here for five years without me but I felt… responsible for him. I didn't know what to do so I went in search of Gobber.

Colonel 'Gobber' Gordon, the General's oldest and most loyal friend was in charge of the base as head of operations and he also happened to be Hiccup's godfather. He was also one of only three people who Ozzie thought might be friends for the lad. I headed to his office and found Gobber wrestling with some requisition orders, swearing softly in his Scottish brogue. I knocked and he immediately waved me in, his piercing blue eyes under a thick blond unibrow frustrated. He had a long blond moustache extravagantly braided, a bald head and he was a big man. Oh yes, and he was also missing his left hand and his right foot. He looked when I came in and threw a salute then laid down his pen and smiled at me.

"What canna do for ye, lassie?" he asked me warmly. I smiled back and sat in the chair he indicated with his hook.

"Where's Hiccup?" I asked him quietly. "I know that he went to talk to the General about his flight privileges…"

"Among other things," Gobber sighed. "Hiccup and his father have, ye may say, a…difficult relationship." I raised an eyebrow. Wasn't this a bit personal? But ever since I had arrived, Gobber had assumed I was Hiccup's friend because I had rescued him and helped him. In Gobber's world, that had translated into telling me everything I might ever want to know about Hiccup but would never even think to ask. To say he was indiscreet would be the world's biggest understatement—but what wasn't an understatement would be to say he loved the boy as a father. Almost certainly a million times more than his actual father. I guessed this was his way of trying to sell Hiccup to me as a friend and ensuring I would be there for him because it's pretty obvious even from my short time here, that almost no one else is.

"How so?" I asked. He sighed.

"Ye know his mother died when he was a wee bairn?" I nodded, remembering the image of that tiny boy, standing alone by his solid father with not even the comfort of having his hand held. "Stoick blamed the boy. It was a car accident, nothing tae do with wee Hiccup, o' course, but Valka died and the boy lived. In Stoick's mind, it should have been the other way round. So when he was landed with the boy after her death, he basically abandoned him." My eyes widened. "He was given a succession of nurses and housekeepers but he was basically sent away to school. Stoick only had interest in a son like hi'self-and Hiccup was not that boy."

"Hmm," I said softly. Hiccup had been really small as a kid, if that photo was anything to go by—and even as an adult, he's a scrawny, lanky toothpick. "Is Snotlout really his cousin?" Gobber nodded regretfully.
"Yeah," he said, his tone taking on a small growl. "Snotlout actually enjoys torturing the boy and always has. And of course, Snotlout is the paragon of virtue, as far as Stoick concerned."

"Big, dumb, self-centred, aggressive and vicious," I condemned. Gobber cracked a grin.

"I see ye've met him," he said happily.

"Punched him in the face today," I reported with some satisfaction. His eyes popped wide open.

"That's news," he admitted. I shrugged without any regret.

"He's been harassing me since I arrived-which I can handle-but he was about to punch Hiccup and I wasn't going to watch that!" I admitted. His unibrow rose. "Look, sir, you've seen Hiccup. He looks like he's been through a tenderiser! He's skinny as a twig and his leg was badly injured so he's on crutches. Yet Snotlout decided to have a go at him while he was sitting with me at lunch and then, when he lost the argument, he grabbed Hiccup and was about to hit him. Hiccup's my friend and I wasn't going to let him hurt him any more." I sighed. Gobber leaned across and patted me on the shoulder. That made me feel worse.

"And that was a good thing ye did, lass," he reassured me. "Though Spitelout, his father, is head of security…" I groaned. Couldn't someone have mentioned that tiny little fact before I decked that pillock? Gobber tapped the side of his nose with his finger conspiratorially. "And Snotlout won't want anyone to know he was decked by a lass-especially his father. Of course, everyone will know by now, but he'll act as if it hasn't happened. But watch out, lass. He won't forget-and he may choose to make life harder for Hiccup." I groaned. That's the last thing I wanted.

"Is he okay?" I asked, returning to the point of my visit. He suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"Aye, in a manner of speaking," Gobber said in a low voice. "But the talk didnae go well. I-I think they had some cross words." I winced.

The single worst father in the history of the world. My father wanted a son like him-and it's really difficult to stand there, staring into his disappointed eyes every single day.


"He's in the brig," he admitted. I leapt to my feet.

"He's in a cell?" I could hear my voice rise, the tone outraged. Of course, this was none of my business, but it sounded unfair. "W-why?" I kicked myself. It sounded like a stupid question. Gobber sighed.

"Mutiny? Treason? Being a bad son? Thor, I don't know!" he admitted. "Knowing Stoick, probably all three! Look, lass. Mebbe ye should speak tae him yerself. I'll arrange for ye tae see him. Cells are on the second level down." I headed for the door and somehow I managed a smile.

"Thanks, Colonel," I said. He grinned.

"Call me, Gobber. Everyone else does!" he grinned back and reached for the phone.

I walked along the corridor to the stairs and headed down to level two. I didn't even know we had cells-though, I suppose I should have guessed. My attention was more on the infirmary-and the more unusual aspects of the base. As I got closer, I saw the bulky shapes of the MPs and paused but the closest-a bulky young man with short blond hair, blue eyes and a kind expression-waved me on and I was allowed into the cell block-to be met by a loud and frustrated scream.
I halted: it was Hiccup. He let out another almighty yell and then collapsed back onto his bunk, throwing his arm over his face in a gesture of utter frustration. I walked closer to his cell, not sure if he was okay or willing to see me.

"Erm-hi," I attempted. He opened his eyes, cast me a sideways glance and closed them again.

"Hi," he said with a sigh. I frowned.

"Are you okay?" I asked. He reluctantly sat up because he realised it was pretty rude to just lie slumped on his bunk when I'd made the effort to come to speak with him. His face looked apologetic and defeated.

"Never better," he said sarcastically. "Can't recall when I've had so much fun." I folded my arms and cast him a mild glare and he subsided. "Sorry. Just never planned on ending up here either," he admitted.

"Then how did you?" I asked him directly. He sighed dramatically.

"Talking to my Dad!" he shot back as if a typical father-son interaction ended with the son in jail. I raised an eyebrow and leaned nonchalantly against the bars as he ran his hand tiredly through his messy hair. "You've met the General, I presume?" I nodded.

"Didn't believe your little chat with him would go down well," I confessed softly. Stoick hadn't seem the type to change his mind. Hiccup winced.

"Let's just say he's ashamed of all of this…" And he gestured to himself. I frowned. From my interactions with him, he's determined, clever, kind, funny and seriously cute. He's just not alpha male military material. He sagged.

"I find that hard to believe," I said, trying to keep my voice light. He looked pretty down and in need of some serious reassurance. He sighed more deeply.

"Look, he wanted an extra-large son, beefy arms, extra guts and glory on the side and and got a talking fishbone," he explained tonelessly. "No way that equation is ever going to work out." I leaned against the bars again.

"Any thing I can do?" I asked him more gently. He sagged in defeat.

"Smuggle a hacksaw to me in a cake," he suggested.

"What kind of cake?" I prompted him, my eyes twinkling. He stared at the floor.

"Surprise me," he invited but his green eyes warmed slightly as he looked up. "Though with your cooking-no offence-it may be on fire and impossible to tell!" My eyes widened at the tease and I felt myself purse my lips in an expression my mother would have been proud of. "Look, I appreciate what you're doing but…" he carried on, seeing I wasn't too impressed my the critique of my non-existent culinary skills. I stood up straighter.

"What am I doing?" I asked him sharply. He stared at me.

"You're feeling guilty," he guessed. "Either because you understand how betrayed I felt or because you feel sorry for me. I really hope it's not the second one."

"Bad luck," I replied shortly. "I do feel sorry for you. Because I don't think you've been treated fairly and I really do want to be your friend. And I was-am-sorta falling for you and I really miss
having you to talk to even though its only been a couple of days. I mean, I've spoken to Ozzie and Gobber and they both seem hell-bent on selling you as this amazing friend which is cool with me because I am utterly isolated here and have no idea what's going on!" I stopped to draw breath and met his astonished green gaze. The wide-eyed look suited him. "And now I'm coming over as crazy woman!" I sighed and he cracked a small grin.

"Almost as crazy as someone falling over in the alley outside your house and claiming to have a dragon!" he suggested and I relaxed. A little.

"Seriously, are you okay?" I asked him and he shrugged wearily.

"Gothi says I'll be fine, though I'll have even more scars on my leg," he admitted heavily. "But the main problem is my Dad…sorry, the General…" His sarcasm was pretty heavy and I could see him feeling horribly let down. The man was his father, after all but he seemed to treat Hiccup like a stranger. I recalled he hadn't even visited him in the infirmary. "Snotlout was right: he has revoked my flight privileges until they can fit trackers to Toothless and I. He didn't trust me not to run off again." I smiled.

"And will you?" I asked. He paused then gave a shrug.

"Can't see the point," he murmured hopelessly. "Alvin clearly has superior intelligence and full access to all our systems so all I do is expose Toothless to him when he is safer here. But he needs to fly. He's a Night Fury-the fastest and most manoeuvrable dragon. He lives to fly and depriving him of it is…cruel." He sighed. "And I did that. When I was attacked by the Skrill during training and before we knew what Dagur was up to, I screamed for him and he came. He saved my life—but he lost part of his tail in the process and he can only fly with a rider to work the prosthesis. I am his rider and I already grounded him when I hid him. Now he is being punished for my mistakes. That's what the argument was about: he wouldn't punish me alone. He insisted Toothless still had to suffer as well." He sagged and covered his eyes. "I failed him," he groaned and there was definite self-loathing in his soft voice.

"You did what you felt was right," I reminded him gently. "You wanted to keep him safe. You just forgot to keep you safe as well!" He groaned and collapsed back onto his bunk.

"Thank you for pointing that out," he sighed.

"Maybe that's my job?" I smirked. He raised an eyebrow.

"Very well, Milady," he replied and there was a slight tease in his voice that made my heart flutter a little, "though I should warn you that I am trouble with a capitol H-I-C-C-U-P!"

"Hmm. Someone needs to learn how to spell. Or is that an American spelling of trouble?"

"Nope. Berkian," he shot back and he was grinning now. "All I need to do now is let you exactly what you're getting…"

"HICCUP!"

We both looked up to see Gobber limping in, his face flushed. Hiccup sat up abruptly, his expression suddenly serious. He knew the Colonel well and could read his expression.

"What is it, Gobber?" he asked. The Colonel was already motioning the MPs to open his cell door.

"It's that damned Nadder!" he said gruffly. "She's gone wild again. Something must have spooked her and she's flipping those poisoned spines all over the habitat. None of the others will go near
her. Can you come?" I frowned. The words poisoned spines and none of the others will come made me nervous. Hiccup, unsurprisingly, staggered up and limped badly to the door-they'd taken his crutches.

"Of course," he said worriedly and waited for the door to swing open. The guard didn't look happy as he limped out. There was a levelling of weapons as if he was about to jump them!

"This is against the General's orders!" the MP pointed out officiously.

"Oh, stick a Gronckle in it!" Gobber snapped. "I'm in charge of the Operations of this base and Hiccup here is best equipped to preserve a valuable asset. Otherwise…" He paused and his voice dropped menacingly. "Otherwise, she may well need to be euthanised." Hiccup took another step and yelped in pain.

"Where are my crutches?" he snapped but the MP looked back blankly. I stepped forward and slid under his arm.

"Reporting for duty," I smirked. He looked at me and recalled those trips to the bathroom where I was his only support. For a moment he hesitated and I wondered if this was a pride thing but only for a moment. Then I felt the familiar warmth of his arm across my shoulders and the weight he put through me. It's nothing I haven't handled before and I was glad to help him. It felt...right.

"Thanks," he said gruffly and we turned to follow Gobber towards the dragon habitats.

oOo

After a lot of arguing with the guards-apparently I didn't have the right clearance-we made it through to the third level and some of the smaller dragon habitats. Hiccup's grasp on my shoulder tightened and I glanced up. His face had gone very serious and his eyes narrowed slightly as the echo of a roar sounded through the corridor. The large, blue-eyed guard had followed us and we all stopped as the roar sounded again.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" the large blond MP muttered, his eyes growing rounder. "She sounds very unhappy."

"Quit it, Fishlegs!" Hiccup said sharply. "I can hear her. And I can guess who's been upsetting her!"

"Who's her?" I asked, feeling left out. Fishlegs? Wasn't he one of the riders? And one of Hiccup's former friends who abandoned him?

"The female Nadder, X26," Fishlegs the large MP explained.

"She's quite prickly," Hiccup told me gently, leaning close. "And she's not got a rider so she has no anchor. As a tracker class dragon, she is pretty highly strung and aggressive. If she doesn't find a rider, there are proposals to have her put down." His hand tightened fiercely on my shoulder and I could hear the strain in his voice. "Take me in, Astrid," he asked me firmly and I led him to the brushed steel door of Pen Eleven. He straightened up and took a limping step forward, wincing as he put any weight on his ravaged stump. He pulled his shoulders back and glared at the palm-reader and painfully moved his bandaged and broken left hand which couldn't be any use for the scanner. Then he stabbed in his clearance code and after a long moment, the words flashed up:

ACCESS DENIED.

"Are you kidding me?" he exploded, spinning to face Gobber and collapsing gracelessly to one
side. I grabbed him before he ended up in a heap on the floor but his face was animated with anger. "I cannot believe this! You've revoked my access? I am the Thor-damned leader of the riders and if I can't even access the dragons, then what the Hel am I supposed to do here?"

"What you are ordered, Haddock!" a cold voice sneered and Hiccup rolled his eyes as he swung unsteadily round to face a stocky, black-haired officer with the same blue eyes as his son: Colonel Spitelout Jorgenson, Head of Security. I inspected him slowly: his face was cold and his eyes extremely unfriendly. Hiccup swallowed and reined in his anger a little.

"Except I'm ordered to help with an out of control dragon, Spitelout!" he replied seriously. "Someone-maybe some valuable assets-may be getting damaged because you've cut off my access." His tone was sarcastic. Jorgensen senior lurched forward and fisted Hiccup's shirt, hauling the younger man close.

"I'm still going to prove you are in league with those traitors!" he hissed.

"Gonna be disappointed!" Hiccup shot back, though his eyes were looking more uncertain. I realised: he didn't trust Spitelout. The man was a relative as well, wasn't he? There seemed to be some pretty poor family dynamics in that house. Spitelout stuck his face right in Hiccup's.

"I'm going to enjoy seeing you put in your place!" he sneered and slapped his palm onto the reader. There was a hiss.

ACCESS GRANTED.

Hiccup shrugged him off defiantly than limped forward, his leg buckling and I insinuated myself under his questing arm, feeling the shuddering sigh of relief at my presence. Spitelout, Gobber and Fishlegs remained outside as the doors closed behind us and I inclined my head up to look at him.

"Wow. Mr Popular," I noted. He grimaced in reply and gestured up ahead. "Only with them," he said, his tone a little sad. And then I stared. Because before us was a huge space, easily the size of a football field, carved from the rock of the mountain and forty feet high. The walls had ledges carved in them and there were rocks and perches cut in. A shallow pond and a selection of shrubs were panted in the floor, under a roof of LED lights. I blinked and gasped. High above, a trio of small, cat-sized dragons swooped and chattered and a lumpy brown dragon wallowed happily in a mud-bath. But standing right in front of us was an amazing dragon, so totally different to Toothless that I could hardly believe they were both dragons. It was larger and far more upright than Hiccup's Night Fury friend, much closer akin to a bird than a reptile in appearance. It was bipedal, with smaller furled wings than the Night Fury and a beak-like head with a horn on the nose and a spiny frill at the back of its head. The colouration was light blues with gold accents. I thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She was agile and her motions jerky, birdlike. Her long tail was laden with spines that flicked up as she crowed in agitation.

"Easy, girl," Hiccup crooned gently, his soft voice soothing. He rested his hand on me for a long moment. "Stay," he whispered as he hobbled forward and approached her, his hand outstretched. "Shh, shh-I'm not here to hurt you. I know the twins have been mean again but I promise I'll get them to stop." His hand was inches from her beak when she suddenly squawked and batted him away. He toppled backwards and landed hard on his butt. "Oh-kay..." he said warily, staring up, helpless, as the dragon reared over him, her crest of spines flaring. "Now I'm in trouble..."

I didn't hesitate, running forward to stand between him and the dragon. My hands were outstretched, to ward her away, my level gaze meeting her agitated one. "Easy," I said determinedly. "Back!"
"Astrid… dragon training begins and ends with trust," he advised me, suddenly anxious. "No sudden moves. Stay in her blind spot, the point where her horn obscures her central vision. Talk to her and let her know you aren't a threat. She knows my smell—but you are new. She may accept you."

"You hear that, girl?" I said softly, my hand drifting closer to her beak. "I'm new around here and could really do with a few more friends. I mean Hiccup's great but I can't really fly him, can I?" I heard him gape behind me and I turned my head just enough to see a small smile turn the corners of his mouth. His smile is cute and I haven't seen enough of it. "So what do you think, hmm?" I added, turning back to the creature.

And then I felt it, a sudden pressure against my palm. The dragon had pressed her incredibly warm and scaly face into my hand, a low croon sounding through her. Her eyes closed for a moment and when they opened, the pupils were wide and somehow less threatening. I raised my other hand to press against her other cheek and leaned closer. I felt myself smile at the sensation and just rubbed her face. She inclined her head and inspected me carefully, then leaned into me, still giving little squawks. "Hello, girl," I said with a sudden flush of warmth in my chest. "Please to meet you."

"Keep stroking and talking to her," Hiccup advised from behind me, having managed to painfully scramble to his feet. His voice was tight with pain but there was also some pride there that I had done what he clearly hoped I would. "It strengthens the bond." I stiffened.

"Bond?" And then as I half turned to inspect him, he gave me that really cute goofy, lopsided smile.

"Welcome to BERK, Dragon Rider!" he said proudly.
"I cannot believe you tricked me into becoming a dragon rider!" I accused Hiccup, waving my fork at him and splattering baked beans halfway across the table. He shovelled a mouthful of Beef Stroganoff in and gave me a shrug.

"If the Norns decree, then so be it," he told me calmly, chewing. They returned him to the brig after we had left the docile Nadder yesterday and he had only been allowed out this morning. He looked dishevelled, crumpled and had random stubble that definitely needed a shave. But he actually seemed happier and had actively sought me out at lunch for which I was grateful. My Trauma Assessment had been hellish and I had no idea how I had done: I was insanely grateful for his company, though, of course, I was still going to blame him for getting me another million jobs and responsibilities on top of the zillions I already had. And another thing I can't believe if how much he eats! He must have hollow legs-and he's still irritatingly skinny. "Look, you saved her life because I don't think I could have stalled Spitelout much longer." I stared at him. "X26 has been a problem for a while and needed someone strong, intelligent and female."

"What do you mean?" My voice had gone cold and he stared at me, putting his fork down. Had he manipulated me all along? Then I shook myself. This was Hiccup.

"X26 is a female and we are pretty light on the feistier sex in the unit," he told me. "She has rejected every male contact-you saw her reject me out of hand!"

"Feistier?" He blushed and grabbed his fork again—though probably for protection from me.

"Erm…a better adjective than the traditional one?" he offered urgently, seeing my eyes glitter. "Astrid-erm-have you got any other adjectives you want instead? Please don't kill me…" I grinned at his momentary uncertainty. He was sarcastic, smart and decisive when it came to his dragon duties but otherwise he was still easy to tease, utterly lacking in confidence with women and self-effacing.

"Forceful?" I suggested.

"No argument here," he said, still waving his fork for protection.

"Fierce?"

"Ohh, more than you can imagine."

"Fantastic?" I was pushing my luck now.

"Of course!" he added quickly.

"Flatterer!" I accused him.

"Do I get to live?" he asked me. I nodded and he exhaled in relief then shovelled another mouthful in.

"Why a female rider?" I asked him. He shrugged.

"The best pairings seem to work where rider and dragon share a similar character and personality," he explained after chewing furiously for a moment. "Toothless and I are both curious, daredevils and above average intelligence." I filed the information away for future reference. Daredevils? Oh-
that was definitely going to need some explaining! "Snot and Hookfang are both strong, reckless and aggressive. The Nadder X26 is beautiful, smart, protective, fast and determined. Sound like anyone you know?" His green eyes were staring deep into mine as he finished and I smiled at the compliments. For someone who'd not had much practice at talking to girls, he was certainly getting the hang of it fast! Then he blushed slightly and turned back to his plate.

"Thanks," I said quietly. "But how am I going to learn how to fly her and care for her? Especially with Finals and more of my Trauma Assessments coming up?" Hiccup put his fork down and took a sip of water.

"You will be paired with a trainer, an experienced rider who can help and support you as you learn and...um...mentor you through the process," he told me easily. I pulled a face.

"Not Snotface!" I sighed, imagining the utter torment of having that idiot drooling over me.

"Gods, no," he said quickly. "I wouldn't wish him on anyone. And in any case, he's so hopeless he can barely control his own dragon, let alone teach someone else..." Then he rolled his eyes. "Though that hardly stopped him from deciding to train Gustav when Fanghook hatched..."

"Gustav?"

"Mini-Snotlout," Hiccup sighed in exasperation. "He's the youngest recruit and when he bonded, Snotlout instantly decided he was going to be his mentor. They both fly Monstrous Nightmares and they're both reckless, arrogant and wildly overconfident. So, of course, I have to deal with them..." He ran his right hand through his hair again and I felt a surge of sympathy. "No, I'm gonna be your trainer, Astrid."

I dropped my fork. "Oh-kay...so who's getting into whose undies now?" I teased him. As anticipated, he went bright scarlet.

"What? No! I didn't mean...I mean I...argh!" he blathered, trying to think of a suitable response. I grinned. He was so easy to tease.

"Relax. You'll strain something," I reassured him. "I trust you. Now finish your lunch! I think there's some meeting that all riders have to attend in ten minutes." He nodded and caught the apprehension in my voice.

"S'okay," he reassured me in a gentle voice. "I'll protect you from evil Snotlout." I smiled at his genuine concern.

"But who's gonna protect him from me?" I asked.

oOo

We were almost the last to arrive, mainly because Hiccup was still on crutches and we couldn't get a lift to the next level down. He determinedly used the stairs-though pretty slowly-and I didn't want to leave him. Or actually walk into the room full of Riders on my own. The other Riders were lounging all over the room and they were a noisy bunch. There were also more of them than I guessed. I recognised a few-Snotlout, Fishlegs the MP, the riders that helped rescue Hiccup…But all of them, to a man, fell silent as Hiccup entered. I looked shocked but he lifted up his chin and quietly moved to seat at the back of the room, lowering himself into a seat. I walked quickly to sit by him, unnerved by the intensity of the glares. He hadn't been joking when he said he wasn't popular.

Almost immediately, Gobber, the General and Colonel Jorgensen walked into the front of the room
and sat at the table on the little stage. Hiccup gave a quiet groan and sank down in his seat as the General glared across the room.

"I see we are all here-finally," he growled, his eyes lingering on his son. "We have finally returned Toothless and his rider. Congratulations to the team for performing so well in tracking down and locating them. Though I would appreciate less colourful language and whooping, Thorstons!"

"You got it, Chief!" a male voice called. It was one of the people I had seen on that weird two-headed dragon. He was a surfer type with long blond dreadlocks and a very relaxed attitude.

"Yeah, what he said!" a raucous female voice added and the (only very slightly) feminine version of him with blonde braids high-fived the first man.

"Enough," the General growled, casting them an irritated glare. "As you may have noticed, we have a new Rider. X26 has bonded with Lieutenant Hofferson so her status will officially be upgraded to Rider." I stiffened and scowled at the implication: medics didn't actually consider anyone having higher status than us! But I supposed my access ought to be upgraded to allow me to visit the Nadder.

"I will be her trainer," Hiccup announced calmly. Stoick scowled at him.

"Since your flight privileges are revoked and you couldn't ride anyway, I thought Snotlout would be more appropriate!" he growled. Hiccup's eyes narrowed.

"While I respect your military prowess…Dad…" he replied in an even though ever-so-slightly-sarcastic voice, "you really don't have a clue about the capabilities and talents of the Riders. Snotlout can't even control his own dragon. He certainly couldn't train another rider!"

"I trained Gustav, Useless!" Snotlout sneered. Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"I rest my case. And look how that turned out!" he groaned.

"Hey, I'm a great rider, Useless!" a younger black-haired man-Gustav-called. I recognised him from the purple and tan spiky dragon who had helped rescue Hiccup.

"I'm a great rider!" Snotlout added, preening.

"So how many times has Hookfang set your pants on fire this week?"

"Four but that's not the point…" Snotlout growled back. Hiccup folded his arms.

"I am in operational charge of the Riders-as well as the most qualified-and I will mentor Astrid," Hiccup said levelly, his tone insistent.

"Honestly, Useless-why would she want a fishbone when she can have beefsteak?" Snotlout sneered, flexing his muscles. Other muscles had to get out of the way and he was impressively bulked up but not my type. At all. Ever.

'And since you are not flying at present and your access and privileges are revoked, Sergeant Jorgensen will take command of the unit," Spitelout announced harshly. "You are on restricted access and will be accompanied at all times by a fully accredited Rider when you visit the pens. You will seek permission from one of us three before seeing your dragon. You will not fly until the General decrees you are authorised. Is that clear?" Hiccup lurched to his feet, his eyes flashing with anger.
"Should I be in chains as well?" he snapped. "Sackcloth and ashes? Tell me!"

"You should be confined to the Brig, you fucking traitor!" Spitelout snarled. "You almost gave the Night Fury to the Outcasts! If this was a proper unit and not a dragon minding outfit, you would be facing charges that would have you shipped out and locked away like the piece of shit you are!"

"Enough!" Stoick shouted and the room fell silent. Hiccup remained on his feet, breathing hard and glaring at his Uncle. I could see his hand was trembling. "Take your seat, boy." Hiccup cast him a rebellious glance. "NOW!" Reluctantly, he lowered himself back into his seat. I raised a hand. The General nodded to me. "Lieutenant?" I rose to my feet and stood at ease.

"Sir, may I request Hiccup as my trainer?" I asked calmly. "He explains well, he is familiar with my dragon and, as you said, he won't have many flying duties with his injuries, so may have a little more leeway to get me up to speed." He stared at me: he couldn't fault my logic and if I wanted the best damned trainer, then I was going to get him! Anyone but Snotlout. The General frowned at me for a moment and then nodded.

"Your request is granted, lieutenant," he said gruffly.

"Thank you, sir," I said briskly and sat by Hiccup again, a little smile of triumph lifting my lips. He eyed me with a cynical expression and shrugged.

"He's right about one thing," he commented. "I won't be flying anytime soon." And he looked utterly devastated about that fact. I reached out and gently laid a hand on his arm and he stared at it for a moment before patting it and giving a wan smile to acknowledge my gesture.

"We have further intelligence that Alvin is dealing with a source in the North, who is seeking further dragons," Stoick reported. "Some of the Nordic Museums have suffered a spate of break-ins that have ravaged their archives. Someone is looking for more data about the whereabouts of more nests."

"If there are any," Spitelout added grimly.

"Who's behind these raids?" a woman in the front row asked. She was slim, pretty and self-assured, her long jet hair braided over one shoulder.

"Madman, name of Drago Bludvist," Gobber added. "He has been associated with some of the worst terrorist atrocities in the last five years. He must not get his hands on them."

"In the meantime, we need to remain on our guard for incursions," the General commanded. "We have the only viable dragons so far-and the unhatched eggs are a portable resource that would be much easier to take than the subadults or adults."

"Security clearances have been tightened and the system firewall and protocols increased," Spitelout added. "I know there have been rumours..." And he cast a nasty glare at Hiccup who stared stonily forward. "...rumours that there are leaks in our system but my review did not find any evidence of any such leaks. Meaning human error, carelessness and protocol violations have been responsible for any security breaches."

"Yeah-like sneaking out for unauthorised rides!" Snotlout taunted and Hiccup's fist bunched. I could see his shoulders tighten in anger as well.

"Stealing a Night Fury!" Gustav added snarkily.

"Or allowing a civilian unrestricted access!" a very bulky, pig-faced man added, his buzz cut hair
not complimenting his bulbous features. His small dark eyes were cruel and he cast Hiccup a scornful look.

"Got it. Everything is my fault," he said tonelessly next to me. "Shame that Toothless is bonded to me or you could just get rid of me altogether."

"Don't tempt me!" a well-ripped man with a military tattoo on his bare arms and short black hair shouted at him.

"Dagur and Savage are confirmed to be with Alvin but the whereabouts of their dragons is unknown," Stoick continued, cutting off any further discussion. Hiccup leaned towards me, his green eyes flicking from staring at his father to inspect my face.

"Dagur won't let anyone else near his dragon," he murmured softly. "Whatever he's done to it has driven it insane. It will respond to him, but it's overaggressive and very hard even for him to handle. He taught it to kill. It needs a specialised habitat-insulated to prevent it accruing additional electricity and unleashing that with devastating effect. That kind of facility isn't cheap or easy to disguise. A lot of specialist building materials would be required."

"Which could be traced?" I murmured back. He nodded.

"I'll ask Ozzie if he fancies a little side project," he whispered.

"Do we have Alvin's location?" Snotlout asked confidently.

"Probably in the Borders," Spitelout reported. "His Holding Companies own a myriad of suitable properties and he moves around frequently. There is a dearth of CCTV and satellite imagery of his property portfolio, almost certainly deliberate. IT are still tracking down his current whereabouts and will update us when they have more data. We need those dragons back." I wondered why they would want the deranged Skrill but I supposed it was unique—even if it was dangerous and uncontrollable. I guessed if someone found a T-rex, they'd want it for the same reasons.

"The next training exercise will be in McRay Glen, 0700 tomorrow," Stoick announced. "Sergeant Jorgenson, please come and discuss the exercise plan with us in fifteen minutes. The rest of you—dismissed." As they swept out, Hiccup sighed and face-palmed.

"That idiot couldn't organise a bar fight," he muttered. I stared at him.

"Where did you get that one?" I asked, mildly surprised.

"Gobber, of course," Hiccup admitted. "Why?"

"Traditionally, someone with pitiful organisation skills is deemed to be unable to organise a piss-up in a brewery," I explained to him, guessing his transatlantic upbringing may not have covered the well-known saying. He quirked an eyebrow.

"Aah," he said, understanding. "No—because he'd drink the lot then blow it up!" Then we heard the scrape of footsteps and saw several of the Riders glaring down on us. The large, buff jet-haired man who had shouted at Hiccup earlier narrowed his dark eyes and folded his muscular arms.

"So…no flying, no visiting Toothless, no access to the dragons…you really are completely Useless!" he sneered. Hiccup glanced up.

"Eret, haven't you got a small child to bully or helpless animal to torment?" Hiccup asked him wearily.
"You don't wanna hang with him, sweet cheeks," Eret warned me cruelly. "He's poison. You wanna be one of us! I bet he hasn't even introduced us!"


"She's fighting to control herself," he said confidently. Yeah-but not as he guessed. Lunch in throat time.

"The twins-Ruffnut and Tuffnut Thorsten," and Erst gestured to the female and male riders of the two-headed dragon.

"Heather Oswaldson," the pretty black-haired girl introduced herself, her green eyes glittering. I frowned. Oswaldson? As in Ozzie and Dagur? I smiled at her-she looked like she may be friend material. "This is Cameron Camicazi Voleur," she added, gesturing to a smaller, wild-haired blonde girl fidgeting at her side. The girl winked. Gustav leered at me and admitted he was called Gustav Larsson.

"Mini-Snotlout," Hiccup murmured quietly.

Two older men were introduced as Bucket and Mulch and the pig-faced man volunteered his name as Donald Harrigan.

"Dogsbreath," Hiccup murmured too quietly for the others to hear. Fishlegs gave his name-Fishlegs Ingerman (where did all these people come from? Why is there no one called Smith or Jones?) Then Erst reached forward and took my hand in a patronising and inappropriate gesture and gently pulled me to my feet.

"Astrid-may I call you Astrid?" he asked smoothly. "You really don't want to isolate yourself with that useless, treacherous...civilian. He has screwed this unit up from day one. He undermines discipline, disobeys orders and never follows the General's plans. He goes out after curfew and violates security protocols. Sticking with him will deprive you of...well, us! We'll take care of you. We'll be there for you. You'll always have someone to talk to, spend time with...trust. After all-we're Brothers in Arms!" He gave a cocky grin and moved slightly to show his unit tattoo. I glanced up at him and the others behind him, all nodding and encouraging me to come with them. Snotlout made a kissy face and I felt like decking him again.

I heard Hiccup move his feet very slightly behind me, awaiting the worst. He assumed I would choose fellow-soldiers over him every day of the week. Why wouldn't he? He had been rejected and isolated even here, where he should be accepted in this unique unit. I pulled my hand from Eret's and folded my arms with a scorching glare at the lot of them.

"Actually, we were 'brothers in arms' when I arrived here and none of you assholes would give me the time of day!" I snapped. "Now I accidentally end up with a dragon and suddenly I'm one of you and you can't wait to become best buddies? The only people here who have behaved with any decency or camaraderie are the medical team, Ozzie-and Hiccup. So if you think I'll choose you over him on the basis of that lame pitch, then you really are an utter prick!" His thick brows dipped into a scowl. My eyes lingered on all their shoulders: Snotlout was the highest ranked at sergeant and the fact Eret had taken my hand and used my first name without permission also annoyed me no end. "And before you open that big mouth and spout some vacuous comment, remember, I'm a medic first and foremost. So whether you become my best buddy or we never speak again, you are gonna see me in this base-soldier-deal with me in this unit but be assured that I will associate with whoever I damned well please!"
Eret and the others stared at me in shock and I heard a few snide comments—but then they drifted away and the room emptied. I heard Hiccup chuckling beside me and I turned to him, my eyes flashing. "WHAT?"

"Way to make friends and influence people," he smirked quietly though his expression was relieved. "At least I tried to fit in…"

"They are assholes," I grumbled, sitting back and regretting my outburst. But honestly, I had just got so mad about the way they were treating Hiccup who was my friend. I mean, the guy had been through Hel and all they've done is make life worse for him. He ran his hands through his hair and nods.

"No argument here," he told me though his tone was thoughtful, "but you need to get to know them as well as me. You'll be part of the unit and we all need to work together eventually." I nodded: I knew what he was saying but I was so mad at their attitude. He could read my mood and could tell I wasn't happy. So he jerked himself to his feet with a groan and grabbed his crutches. "Come on," he said as he manoeuvred towards the door. "Let's go and see your dragon!" My heart fluttered in excitement as I scrambled up and trotted after him, meeting his gentle green eyes. "It's time for your first lesson."
We were making good time out of the seminar room when Gobber stopped us and gave me a new ID badge:

Lieutenant Astrid Hofferson, Rider/Medical.

"I thought ye may need this, lassie," he said warmly and I accepted it with a grateful smile. I mumbled a word of thanks and clipped the new ID badge on with a hint of pride. Truly, it wasn't something I had been expecting when I came to BERK but I wasn't actually complaining. He winked at me as well. "I've moved yer wee lassie to Pen Five," he said with a grin and paused, staring at Hiccup. "And you couldn't keep yer mouth shut for a moment, could ye?" he sighed. Hiccup shrugged.

"Gobber, we both know Snotlout isn't an option to lead the unit," he said quietly. "Much as I hate to say it, Eret or Heather would be better leaders. Dogsbreath Donald and the twins certainly aren't. Nor is Fish."

"You are the best leader but ye had tae run away!" Gobber warned him in a low voice. "Spitelout is really gunning for ye, lad. Just promise me ye'll try not tae deliberately annoy him." Hiccup frowned slightly, clearly giving no such undertaking.

"Can I see Toothless?" he asked softly. It was a definite plea. Gobber sighed.

"Yer father has made it very clear yer not to be granted access for at least three days, laddie. I'm sorry," he said and ambled away. I turned to Hiccup.

"Um...where is Pen Five?" I asked sheepishly. He sighed.

"I'll take you," he offered and began to walk alongside me, his skill with the crutches meaning I was almost having to trot to keep up. I almost said something but his face was closed and unhappy and it was clear he was brooding about what had gone on. I could understand the reasoning, reprimanding a member of the unit who had broken protocol and orders but Hiccup wasn't actually a soldier and had done what he thought was best to protect his dragon. And, like it or not, I thought he was right: the Outcasts had picked him up before Stoick's team had arrived. Clearly, despite Spitelout's assurances, security here wasn't watertight.

"Dragon training begins and ends with trust," Hiccup said earnestly as we caught the lift up two levels. He'd told me this before but he was serious: it was his mantra. "You need to project reassurance and friendship. Ideally love, but that takes time." I stole a glance at him and his eyes were misted: he was thinking about his own training with Toothless.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. "I really didn't mean to keep anything from you." He glanced up and sighed.
"I know," he admitted. "And I...felt awful going through your private files. But when I saw you had searched my Dad and BERK, I was worried that you would be in danger. I really didn't know much about you and I had risked everything to get Toothless away." He moved his left hand slightly, wincing at the pain from the breaks. "I actually felt heartbroken when I realised you were military because...it was kinda nice to have someone to talk to as well."

"I'm sorry," I said again. "Can-can we sorta start over?" He looked at me as we emerged into level four and gave a small nod. So I stepped in front of him and stuck out my hand. "Hi. Lieutenant Astrid Hofferson, medic and...um...Nadder Rider." He gave me a smirk and paused to readjust his crutches so he could get his right hand free.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, Night Fury Rider," he said and took my hand. "Pleased to meet you." And then we both burst out laughing. "That was lame," he chuckled and I nodded, grinning. "Now, let's see this dragon of yours."

Mine. She was mine. Well, technically, as the General had stated, she was a piece of biological ordnance, but in reality she was a living breathing creature who had chosen me above all others offered to her as her Rider. And that was the kind of endorsement that no money can buy. I was grinning like an idiot as we arrived at the big steel armoured door labelled PEN FIVE. Hiccup shrugged and gestured to my ID-he knew his access was revoked—and I tentatively pressed my right hand onto the reader. There was a breathless pause.

ACCESS GRANTED.

The door slid open and I walked in, with Hiccup a step behind, his eyes narrowed. I could hear the tension in his breathing: he clearly felt responsible for me and my safety and I stopped as the door slid closed, waiting for his instructions. The place was huge—maybe a hundred feet wide, fifty deep and high and with uneven rocky walls and floor like a natural gulley. There was a small stream and several large boulders and some heather. I couldn't see any dragons. "Call her," he advised me. I blushed. Just what did I call her? She didn't have a name.

"Hey, girl!" I shouted. "It's me! Remember?" And it seemed she did because she came trotting round the rocky corner, cawing in excitement. She stopped by me, her pupils wide and preening in delight. I lifted my hand and she nuzzled against it immediately. I instantly felt better and began to pet her. "Hey there," I murmured. "I missed you too!" I rubbed her more confidently and scratched her under the chin—and she gave a contented little croon and collapsed.

I gave a little shriek and leapt back, horrified. What the Hel had I done wrong? Oh no—I had killed her! How could I explain this to...

And then I heard him chuckling and slowly turned to see him smothering his laughter as best he could, his emerald eyes twinkling. "They all have a sweet spot beneath the jawline on the left," he explained hurriedly. "You scratch them there and they collapse into a drooling, boneless heap. Only temporary but they love it. She's fine!"

"You could have told me!" I grumbled. He made his way over to stand by me.

"It's okay," he soothed me. "When it first happened to me, I truly thought I'd killed Toothless and threw up!" He offered an embarrassed smile which I returned. "You still need to name her," he reminded me after an awkward pause and I stared at her as she lay relaxed, blinking slowly, her pupils widely dilated. My mind went utterly blank.

"Um...Spiny?" I suggested.
"Seriously?"

"Spinetail?"

"Sounds like a fish."

"Beakface? Frillneck? Bluey?"

He rolled his eyes and face-palmed. "Promise me," he said dryly, "when you have children, you'll let their father name them?"

"Doris!" I shot back. He looked shocked.

"Er…we never give them human names," he said in a quiet voice. "It's always something inspired by or related to the dragon…" He shook his head again. "Doris!"

I stared at her and gently rubbed her scaly face, hearing a low purr. I could see her soaring through the air, her glorious blue and gold magnificent against the sunset, the dawn, the stormy sky…

"Stormfly," I said. And she gave a happy little squawk. He gave a grin.

"Stormfly it is," he said. "She approves."

"Finally," I sighed. "But I liked Doris…" His look ended that conversation as a familiar roar sounded. Hiccup spun and his eyes widened as a black shape galloped towards us, its wide green eyes locked only on the skinny, lanky shape before him. Hiccup took a couple of painful steps forward and dropped his crutches, extending his arms with utter confidence. The dragon skidded to a halt just in front of him, his eyes wide and unthreatening, his attitude like a joyous puppy. He gave a gummy grin at the human and then Hiccup threw his arms around the blunt muzzle and hugged Toothless for all he was worth. His eyes closed tightly and his arms tightened further.

"I missed you, bud," he murmured as he clung to the dragon. The creature crooned as Hiccup turned his head to rest his other cheek against the scaly face. He lay across the dragon's face for a long time. "I'm so sorry," he murmured. "I take you from the others, abandon you, then return and get you recaptured. I am the most useless rider ever…" Toothless pulled his head up to inspect the bowed shape, his big green eyes forgiving. "And I can't even see you because they've taken my flight privileges. Oh gods, I've grounded you…"

Toothless stared at the lanky shape, his head bowed in shame and apology, then gravely licked his face. I watched him give a little rumble and lick Hiccup again. The young man looked up as the saliva swished across his bruised features and his face creased into a sudden smile. "Thanks, bud," he murmured roughly, his voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what I'd do without you…" Toothless licked him again and he recoiled. "EEEWW! You KNOW that doesn't wash out!" he protested and flicked some back at the dragon. Toothless huffed, then licked a front paw and fastidiously cleaned his face with it, like a 26-foot long house cat. Hiccup was still smiling and his expression was totally changed: relaxed and happy. I finally got an inkling of how close he was to this alien creature.

Stormfly gave a little croak and I turned back to her, glad she had recovered. I reached to rub her face and she nuzzled against me and licked me as well. And I understood what Hiccup meant: the saliva was incredible viscous and tenacious. It literally stuck to anything like especially stringy glue. I gave a smile and tried to wipe it off on her face. "You say that doesn't wash out?" I asked.

"They have dry skin and welcome it when you rub moisture or oil into their skin," he murmured just behind me. He had come up surprisingly quietly for someone who couldn't really walk. I
turned to see him there, his left arm in a crutch and his right on Toothless. The Night Fury was sitting neatly like a cat and inspecting the Nadder and I interestingly. "Spitting on your hand works but all dragons really need proper skin care. They do wash themselves or bathe in lakes or the sea, but here, we wash them every couple of days. They also tend to need oiling-fish oils work best. They eat fish but I have read that Nadders also take chicken. Deadly Nadders are vain and need constantly reassuring with words or strokes. When she lowers her head, she's inviting you to get aboard."

"Was that how it was with you and Toothless?" I asked. He paused and shook his head.

"I…erm…jumped on," he admitted and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "He threw me." I smiled, not really able to reconcile what I had seen with someone who would recklessly leap onto a fire-breathing dragon without invitation. His eyes flicked up and there was embarrassment and more than a little self-deprecating humour in the green depths. Then Stormfly surprised me by lowering her head and offering her flexible neck to me. He met my uncertain gaze and nodded. "More than I got," he admitted. So with my heart in my mouth, I scrambled on.

It was a lot harder than climbing on a horse. I'd ridden as a child so I had some basics and I remembered how to grip with my legs as I sat just on her back behind her wings, my hand resting on her neck. She cawed and shuffled slightly. "What do I do now?" I asked him. Even to me, my voice sounded uncertain. He looked at me calmly.

"Talk to her. Reassure her!" he said firmly. I rubbed her neck gently and murmured that she was beautiful and amazing. Hiccup gave a slight nod at the tone, approving, but his eyes narrowed as he saw her shuffle her feet. "She's just getting used to your weight, your feel. Keep your weight forward," he said quickly. I half-turned-and then a slight movement in the periphery of my vision caught my eye.

Stormfly gave an ear-splitting screech, spread her wings and flung herself into the air. I gave a loud scream of shock and horror and clung on for dear life, lamenting the lack of saddle, stirrups or seatbelt. Hiccup froze, his eyes widening and face momentarily blanching in shock. Then he burst into action, tossing his crutch aside and throwing himself into the saddle. Toothless had been left with his saddle and prosthesis apparatus on so when Hiccup needed him, the dragon was ready. But for Hiccup, the experience must have been torture because, from what I could see as I clung on desperately, he had to clip his prosthetic leg into the tail control and work it using his damaged limb. His face locked in a grimace and he paled further but his hands clamped on the saddle and the handles build into the leading edge.

"C'mon, bud!" he murmured and the Night Fury leapt into the air, the huge wings flapping as he swiftly pulled alongside.

"WHAT DO I DO?" I wailed. Stormfly was bucking and dinking, her shrieks of agitation growing louder.

"Stay calm!" he called unhelpfully. "Talk to her. Reassure her!"

"Who's gonna reassure me?" I shouted back.

"I am," he said in a voice that held absolute conviction. I stared at him, believing him, then leaned closer to the head.

"Hey, girl, what's going on, hey?" I tried, in a soothing voice, though I could hear the anxiety wavering in my tone. "It's alright, my beautiful girl. What's upset you?" She screeched and veered hard left, almost dislodging me. "AARGH! She's not listening!"
"No, she's not," he said worriedly and shifted his weight in the saddle. He could see her eyes had changed and her pupils had narrowed to tight slits: she would be near impossible to train in this state. Toothless pulled right alongside and just below me. "Astrid-jump!"

"Are you KIDDING?" I screamed. There was a forty foot drop beneath me. Stormfly bucked again and I felt my legs slipping. I couldn't hang on much longer.

"Trust me!" he shouted and stuck his right hand up. I slid my leg over her back, reached for his hand and threw myself at him. Our hands locked and we collided hard. He groaned as I landed across Toothless's neck and then he wrapped his arm around me, holding me very close. I saw his face lock in a grimace and knew he was in pain. His grip was unwavering as he shifted his weight slightly and Toothless dropped us lightly to the ground. Above us Stormfly screeched and continued her crazy flight. I stared deep into his eyes.

"Er…thanks…" I breathed, aware his arm was still wrapped around me. I lowered my feet to the floor and he finally unwrapped his arm. He was breathing hard.

"Ow. You're welcome," he managed. He grimaced and leaned forward, dropped a hand to his injured leg. "Wow. Gothi was right. I'm really not going to be flying for a while." He winced, then looked up at the screeching dragon.

"I'm sorry," I apologised. "I-I don't know what I did wrong…"

"You didn't do anything wrong," he said evenly and carefully unclipped his leg. It was painful to watch as he winced and flinched through the whole process. At the end, he was white and sweating. "You didn't do anything: something else upset her." He shook his head. "I-I'm not sure what…" And then the door to the Pen opened and a squad of armed men erupted in. They were in the khaki of BERK with the bright red berets of security. Their weapons were levelled at us and I stared in shock. Hiccup groaned and rolled his eyes as Spitelout stalked in.

"You are forbidden to see your dragon!" he snarled.

"But I am the Nadder's trainer," he argued, wearily shoving himself to his feet. Spitelout peered up at the wildly dodging Nadder and his expression was cruel.

"Yes, I can see how well you are doing, boy!" he snapped. "This has been gong on far too long. Out of control dragon. Protocol Nine!"

"No!" Hiccup shouted and lurched forward, trying to block their aim. Spitelout had no compunction about clubbing him over the back of the head with his pistol and he dropped to the floor, his hand pressed on the back of his head and groaning as the security team took aim.

"FIRE!" Spitelout shouted. I spun in horror to stare up at my dragon.

"STORMFLY!" I shouted in sudden fear as the darts embedded into her beautiful body. She gave a bellow of rage and flapped suddenly more irregularly. Then she gave a quizzical croak and folded, falling from the air and slamming into the ground with a sickening crash. I took off, racing towards her, my eyes wide with horror at the impact. I reached her side and felt my eyes prickle with tears. "Stormfly-oh girl, I am so sorry…" I gasped, resting my hands on her flanks. She was still breathing but she was limp and unresponsive, a rash of red darts embedded in her scales. Behind me, Hiccup was painfully dragged to his feet and hauled towards the downed dragon.

"You didn't need to do this," he protested, blinking blearily. "She was no threat. You could have killed her. She needs to be checked out by the Vet department because you could have damaged her
seriously! You should have let her fly it off."

"She could have killed the lieutenant! And that would be your fault!"

"And I know that!" Hiccup retorted. "Gods, I know that."

"And we have to pick up the pieces and sort out your messes, boy!" Spitelout sneered. I could hear the echo of his son's words and realised this was what they both thought and had made clear to Hiccup over a long period of time.

"But this isn't just about me…" Hiccup protested wearily, his eyes sweeping over the limp shape of Stormfly.

"No-this is what happens when you allow a useless civilian traitor to interfere in a military operation!" Spitelout snarled, gesturing to the downed Nadder. "Someone always gets hurt."

Hiccup suddenly pulled his arms free and took a painful step towards me, resting a hand gently on my shoulder in an awkward attempt to reassure me. I could feel him trembling and I looked into his bruised face. His eyes were glazed from the blow but he was frowning and he gestured to one of the darts in her flank that he had been staring intently at. I took a couple of steps forward and plucked it from her body. I turned it over in my fingers: it was different in configuration to the others. I handed it to Hiccup and he frowned.

"This isn't one of ours," he said grimly.
We were swiftly marched to the General's office. The security team half-dragged Hiccup along while I marched after them. Spitelout knocked sharply on the General's door and his low voice invited us brusquely in.

He still looked imposing, now behind the wide steel and glass desk, his head bent forward as he made a note on his desktop blotter. He looked up, saw who had entered his office and sighed. "I presume this is going to take some time," he said impatiently. I stood to attention, my back straight and chin up, eyes front. He flicked his cool gaze across the rest of the team: no one else managed the proper protocol. "At ease, Lieutenant." I complied.

"We were alerted to an out of control dragon in Pen Five," Spitelout reported crisply. "We found Nadder X26 out of control, threatening the life of Lieutenant Hofferson. Trainer Haddock had failed to control the beast and was found in the presence of the Night Fury. We were forced to take down the dragon and arrest Trainer Haddock." Hiccup grimaced as he stared into his father's face and once more saw disappointment.

"Were you in there with Toothless?" the General asked grimly.

"Toothless was there," Hiccup said carefully.

"You are aware of my orders," Stoick growled. Hiccup nodded.

"I knew you would not let me see my dragon for at least three days," he admitted. "Gobber made sure I knew that. However, we were directed to Pen Five where Stormfly had been moved. I was not aware that he was there."

"You should have been!" Spitelout snarled.

"Why?" Hiccup snapped back. "My access and authority has been revoked. So I had no authority to move Toothless or Stormfly to that pen. I had no way of accessing the information about which dragons were within. I have to trust to Operations to keep us safe."

"Stormfly?"

"Lieutenant Hofferson named her Nadder." Hiccup's voice was calm as his father made another note on his blotter.

"What did you do when you found Toothless there?" Stoick growled. Hiccup pulled his shoulders back and lifted his chin.

"What do you think?" he asked quietly. "I greeted my dragon. I've been separated from him so long; I wouldn't ignore him when he came to me." The look in his eyes dared his father to punish him for the insubordination: he was expecting it, in fact.

"So you saw Toothless against my orders, without permission from any senior officer and entered the pens without a fully accredited Rider," Stoick said slowly.

"Thank you for summing it up," Hiccup replied ironically. "Except I had your permission to enter the pens, at least. You granted Lieutenant Hofferson's request for me to be her trainer. So I had to enter her dragon's pen with only her. I had no idea my bud was there-but without him, she would have been killed. We had gotten her to safety before Spitelout and his trigger-happy thugs barged
in and shot her down."

"You claim she was already safe?" Stoick asked him. Hiccup nodded.

"There was no justification in shooting her," he said angrily. "Something had agitated her but she was flying within the pen. Lieutenant Hofferson was clear-Toothless and I had already dealt with that. It would have been preferable to let her burn off whatever annoyed her and then settle. Instead, they shot her down and she landed hard. She needs assessment by the Vets." Stoick stared at him then at Spitelout.

"You haven't informed them?" he asked the Colonel.

"My job is security, not animal control!" he snapped. Then Stoick looked at Hiccup and I.

"This idiot brought us straight here and gave us precisely no chance to call any help for her before they dragged us here!" Hiccup complained bitterly. The General read concern in his face and lifted his wrist-com, murmuring an urgent order. Then he glared back at his son.

"You lost control," he accused Hiccup.

"Training an adult dragon isn't easy," the young man protested. "We were good. Astrid was performing well and bonding well. The dragon invited her onto her back-and then she suddenly… spooked." He limped forward and placed the dart on his father's blotter. "She was darted with this before Spitelout's goons burst in. As we flew up, I could just see the flash against her flank. It's not our design either. And she has never been out of the Complex."

Stoick turned the little dart over in his hand and frowned. "I'll get it analysed and see what was in it," he promised.

"Though the more pressing question is-how did it get into her?" Hiccup asked softly. Stoick looked up and scowled.

"Sir-the more pressing question is what are you going to do about him?" Spitelout insisted. "He has disobeyed all the injunctions we laid on him. He entered the pens without a fully accredited rider, he saw his dragon without permission from a senior officer and flew Toothless without your express permission. I really feel he needs to be returned to his cell to at least demonstrate that this one-legged, insubordinate…"

"Spitelout-I'll take it from here," the General decided shortly. "Dismissed." Seething but unable to protest, Spitelout gave the worst salute he could manage and stormed out, followed by his men. I saluted better and turned to the door. "Not you, Lieutenant. I think you may be involved." I turned back.

"Yes, sir," I said flatly.

"What happened?" he asked me. I took a deep breath.

"I was having my first lesson with Stormfly-Hiccup told me to name her to help bonding," I reported. I found myself starting to smile. "She's really beautiful. Hiccup was guiding me really well-he's a great trainer, sir. Then Toothless came bounding up and he just hugged the dragon. It was so sweet and they clearly missed each other horribly. Stormfly let me onto her back-and I saw something out of the corner of my eye. And suddenly she went wild, took off and began flying from side to side, completely unresponsive to any command or comfort when she had been completely friendly mere moments before."
"Were you afraid?" The question was gentle.

"Yes, sir," I admitted quietly. "I had no way to control her-I wasn't expecting to be flying and neither was Hiccup. But he leapt onto Toothless, despite his bad leg, and they flew up. He evacuated me onto Toothless and we flew down. She was just circling and screeching and was no threat to anyone-and then the Security detail came in and despite Hiccup's protests, they darted her. She fell the full height of the cavern onto solid rock."

"So you weren't in danger when they arrived?"

"No, sir. I was scared and shaken. But I trusted Hiccup because he did everything he said he would. He protected me." Stoick cast a quick glance at his son and nodded.

"Whatever was in that dart is a problem," Hiccup added. "It sent her hyper-aggressive and almost impossible to control."

"Like Dagur's Skrill?" I murmured. He stared at me in shock, then slowly nodded. The General frowned and carefully turned the dart over in his hands.

"No," he said slowly. "The dart is the problem. We all know that the Outcasts found you via BERK before we could get to you. For this dart to be in…Stormfly…then there is still someone here who isn't working for us."

oOo

Though he wasn't sent back to the brig, the ban on seeing Toothless remained so Hiccup slowly made his way back up to IT to see his friend. Sure enough, as he swiped himself into the lab, he found Ozzie bent over a screen while munching a toasted sandwich and head-banging to classic Metallica. He glanced up as he heard the clunk of a crutch and Hiccup slid into a seat by him. He gaped.

"They let you out?" he asked with a quirk of the eyebrow, clicking the music off. Hiccup groaned and rubbed his leg tenderly.

"Ran out of rocks to break," he sighed.

"Hmm. I'm sure the General could have flown some more in." Hiccup winced. "You okay, Hic?" Ozzie's voice was gentle. The younger man shook his head.

"Sure you know the score," he sighed. "Flight clearance revoked, not even allowed to see Toothless until they decide gods know when and there is someone here who isn't working for BERK." Ozzie sat up straighter and his eyes narrowed.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Someone darted Stormfly with something and it made her crazy," Hiccup admitted, fidgeting in his chair. "I left the dart with Dad for analysis." He frowned. "Sorry, I don't trust Spitelout." Ozzie gave a grin.

"Me neither," he said and his fingers danced across the keyboard. "But we can watch how it goes," he added, hacking the analyser and monitoring the process. Hiccup peered over his shoulder.

"I'm not sure the General will approve," he muttered. Ozzie reached down into the drawer of his desk, fishing out a can of beer and chucking it casually to Hiccup.
"You really need to chill, man," he advised and swung round. Then he frowned. He hadn't properly seen his friend since he had been released from the infirmary and he was shocked at how bruised and unwell he looked. "What happened to you?" he asked shortly. Hiccup opened the can and took a long pull. He grimaced.


"Look, he's my brother but he's a crazy son of a bitch," he admitted.

"Psychopathic personality disorder with profound narcissistic and sadistic tendencies," Hiccup corrected him, taking another sip. He winced as he moved his left hand. "Have you heard anything from him?" Ozzie looked guilty then nodded.

"Just a text-telling me he had found his 'other brother'." He rolled his eyes. "Heather's closer to him than me. I guess she'll have heard a bit more. But he's not that keen on family…not when he has his 'brother'. I know he has all sorts of plans on how you two can spend some quality time together…" Hiccup shuddered.

"Just what I need," he said sarcastically. "A sadistic psychopath with an obsession about me." He sighed. He toyed with his can and stared at it for a long time while trying to frame his next question. "Is he…er…into men?" Ozzie cocked an eyebrow.

"You interested?" he asked in shock. Hiccup shook his head urgently. "No!" he shot back in horror. "No—but I wondered if he was because…when I was his prisoner he…er…kissed me…" Ozzie rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I think he might be," he admitted. "Or he may just fancy dominating you in every way he can think of. He's not the clearest of thinkers, my twin brother."

"Understatement of the century," Hiccup retorted. "But we need to find him, Ozzie. He's dangerous-him and that Skrill."

"Deathwing," Ozzie murmured. "About the only thing he loves unreservedly." Hiccup cradled his left hand in his right and tried not the recall the dragon rending his leg apart. He blinked hard.

"We have to find it," he said quietly. "Alvin has it and the materials for a secure pen are very specialised. I know Spitelout won't have considered but I wonder if you might…do a bit of digging…" Ozzie turned to an alert and he frowned.

"Interesting," he murmured, interrogating the system and turning away from his friend. "Your mysterious chemical is an extract of Dracoradix calamitosus-the catastrophic Dragon Root." Hiccup frowned and typed a query in, pulling up the scans of the ancient Bork papers. He flicked through the PDFs until he reached a page with a crude drawing of a bulbous root and a line of runes. Automatically he magnified the image and frowned slightly.

"Dragon Root is immensely attractive to dragons but unlike Dragon Nip, it makes them aggressive and dangerous. Only Gronckles seem immune due to their rock diet," Hiccup read. Ozzie stared at him.

"You can read that stuff?" he asked in shock. Hiccup nodded.

"Needed to as leader so I learned," he admitted softly. "I knew some old Norse anyway because my Dad kinda insisted I learned as a kid and I would have done anything to make him proud of me. Yeah, that ship has sailed! The only other three who can read it are Fishlegs, Bertha and my Dad."
"But you learned ancient Norse runes?"

"So?"

"How long did it take you?"

"Um…about a year to be fluent. I started as soon as I bonded with Toothless…"

"While you were doing your Doctorate?"

"So?"

Ozzie slumped back in his seat and stared at the ceiling. "They never stop underestimating you, do they?" he murmured. Hiccup stared at the can and sighed.

"I don't get out much," he admitted. He idly switched to the Veterinary system and checked on Stormfly. He read the report with a sigh of relief: the dragon would recover. Ozzie peered over his shoulder and gave a low chuckle.

"Ah-ha! I see a reason to get out a bit more," he laughed, sounding spookily like Dagur for that moment. "The delectable Lieutenant Astrid!" Hiccup blushed scarlet and threw a pen at him. "What? You mean you can't see she's only got eyes for you? Way I heard it, she told off every single dragon rider for bad-mouthing you!" Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"Um…yeah, but she was clearly…um…temporarily insane," he protested. Ozzie paused and his face grew serious.

"Hic-you gotta develop a tiny bit of self-belief," he advised. "And go and see the lovely Lieutenant." he tapped an enquiry and her location flashed up: Room 5-62. "I'll do your private enquiry if you see if you can find out how the hell someone got hold of Dragon Root! And Hic-take my advice about Astrid. And for the gods' sake-take her a gift!"

oOo

Alvin the Treacherous lounged back in his enormous calf-skin chair and drained a glass of brandy. He laid it down on his huge, marble-topped desk and his fingers slid over the smooth, cold surface. The good thing about marble was it wiped clean.

He was frustrated: they had the Night Fury in their hands and the damned Dragon Riders had snatched it away-again! His rider has been close to breaking as well. Amazing that such a scrawny boy could be that sassy and smart when he was with the riders but pitiful and vulnerable when he was away from them. He knew that Dagur had tortured the boy-without authorisation, though Alvin wasn't about to make too much fuss on that count-and he knew that Dagur wanted to spend some quality time with Hiccup. He grinned. It was a good carrot to tempt the traitor to play along-for now.

He reached forward and refilled his glass, then allowed his finger to brush a small button on the desk. Immediately Vorg entered and nodded a respectful greeting. The big arms dealer inspected his glass for a moment. "Any news?" he asked.

"Compound Four seems to be everything we hoped," Vorg reported smoothly. "The Nadder X26 was completely uncontrollable once injected. She had to be taken down by multiple tranq-darts."

"Alive?"
"Yes-but she's bonded." Alvin's eyes narrowed: they had planned to target the Nadder. "The new recruit bonded after we tried the fourth low dose test. The bond broke the hold: we then proceeded to the full dose test. The girl was almost killed."

Alvin started laughing. "Does Dagur know yet?" Vorg nodded. "Between you and me, 'e's a few sandwiches short of a picnic. But 'e ain't half good at causing mayhem. And that is exactly what we need." He nodded as he took a good slug of his brandy. "You know the plan: our agent has given us the time and place. Let's go shopping for some dragons!"

I glanced up as I heard the faint tapping at my door and sighed. I'd had a long morning of Trauma simulations and had gone back for practical skills tests after the General released us. I think I did OK but Major Gothi has an amazing poker face and I really couldn't tell how I'd scored.

I hadn't really felt like dinner but I'd gone anyway, though when I got to the mess hall, no one was around that I knew, so I'd taken a plate of macaroni cheese and apple crumble and custard and trudged back to my room to revise for Finals. The faint tapping sounded again so I sighed and scrambled off my bed, then opened the door.

It was Hiccup, standing there awkwardly, holding up a large cup of coffee from the machine in the rec room. He offered me a shy smile. "I...erm...thought you may need this..." he said and held it out to me. I gave him a warm smile and took it, then beckoned him to come in. Awkwardly, he manoeuvred in on his crutches, grimacing slightly.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. He lowered himself stiffly into the chair.

"My leg's not good," he admitted. "Shouldn't have flown. Erm...Gothi was really mad." I nodded, having heard the angry tirade between practicals and then closed the door. Then I looked at him.

"Aren't you having one?" I asked him. He looked up and blushed.

"I could only carry one," he admitted, "and I wanted to surprise you." I blinked at the words and sat on the edge of the bed, taking a sip. It was good coffee and he was watching me self-consciously. I sighed, then rose and opened a drawer and fished out a mug from Disneyland Paris that I had instinctively grabbed when I packed to come here. I'd gone when I was much younger with my parents and I hadn't wanted to leave it: everything I had left from them was precious. With a smile, I poured half the coffee in and handed it to him, then sat opposite him on the bed, sipping my cup. He gave a sigh and rolled the mug in his hands. "Well that failed," he lamented and I shook my head.

"It was really sweet," I assured him, "but I couldn't sit here watching you looking really thirsty and feeling guilty." He ran his hand through his hair and shrugged.

"My own fault," he said and I frowned. For what? Having one leg? Getting beat up and tortured by Dagur and Alvin? "I'm sorry for disturbing you..." And then I got to my feet so abruptly I knocked my revision folder on the floor.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him sharply. "You make a really sweet gesture and bring some some very much needed coffee and suddenly you're apologising? I needed a break and this is just perfect."

"I let you down," he said quietly. "You were nearly harmed. If-if you want another trainer, I will understand. I think Heather is..."
"I want YOU, you dork!" I exploded. "Why do you think I asked the General? I trust you- and Dragon Training is all about trust, isn't it?" He nodded and took a sip of his coffee.

"So you were listening," he murmured. "Not used to that at all..." I walked and sat on the desk next to him, my legs swinging slightly and I cautiously put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hiccup, we're both Riders and though neither of us are currently on full active duty, I don't see any reason not to feel like I deserve to be here." I paused. "And you of all people deserve your place..."

"But I don't!" he exploded, shaking me off. "I'm not part of this unit-I'm just the stupid, clumsy son of the General who got hauled along because he couldn't find even a distant relative to dump me on before he disappeared here! I was doing OK in IT until I was in such a dream I missed the 'do not enter' signs and ended up in the hatching pit and precisely the wrong moment. And since then I've felt SO welcome as part of the team. And I really worry that by sticking with me, you'll end up feeling like this too!" I stared at him.

"Hiccup..." I began and he slumped forward, burying his face in his hands.

"I'm just a failure, Astrid," he said brokenly. "As a rider, a fugitive and as a trainer." He took a shuddering breath. "And I ended up getting you into this whole mess just because I was scared that Alvin would get Toothless. But I almost got him captured and he's ended up grounded and miserable anyway." I wrapped my arms around him because I could tell he needed it but I was shocked at how much: his lanky arms snaked tightly around me and I felt his head bury in my shoulder, his soft hair brushing against my cheek. Gently, I rested my cheek against his head and felt him relax ever so slightly.

"I came because I wanted to see you, you idiot," I soothed him softly. "You didn't drug Stormfly. You saved my life-even when you were unfit to fly! Those idiot MPs shot her down. Please don't think you're a failure, Hiccup, because you're anything but. And I have to say...your father agrees!" He lifted his head and disbeliefing green eyes stared at me. "Snotlout called you 'Useless' when he came to my apartment and the look the General gave would have frozen lava!" He sighed.

"Sometimes, I feel useless," he murmured. "I really want to be checking the dragons for the exercise tomorrow and I know that mutton-head Snotlout won't bother so something will go horribly wrong. And I can do nothing about it."

"Isn't Toothless needed on the exercise?" I asked thoughtfully. "He's the boss dragon, isn't he?" He nodded.

"The Alpha," he corrected me quietly. "I guess. They've never run one without him."

"So they'll take you as his rider, idiot!" I told him, tightening the hug once more. "And with you both there, I'm sure you can stop Snotlout cocking up the whole thing!" He gave me one more squeeze then pulled back. He caught my hand.

"Thanks, Astrid," he said and quirked a slight smile. He rubbed his face. "Stormfly is gonna be okay. She's just sprained a wing and has a few bruises." I stared at him. "I have friends in IT and they checked for me. She's fine." I sagged in relief and he squeezed my hand again.

"But are you?" I asked him gently. "I saw Spitelout hit you..." I reached for his head and he ducked away.

"I'll be fine," he protested stubbornly. "I've got a hard head..." I scowled.

"Come here!" I said sternly and though he stared at me for a long moment, he eventually relented.
and let me run my fingers through his hair and gently feel the lump on the back of his head. He hissed gently in pain. "Hmm, size of a small egg. Headache?"

"A little. I'll be fine," he insisted. I stared into his eyes and nodded.

"You will tell me if you aren't? I wouldn't want to be abandoned here with Snotlout if you went off selfishly dying!" He smiled at my tart tone.

"I'll bear that in mind," he teased me as I slumped down onto the bed and tossed a folder aside.

"So what're you doing?" he asked me shyly. I sighed.

"Revision," I groaned. He dared to give a slight smirk and I scowled at him. "Not all of us have done a degree in a year and a doctorate in two, dragon boy!" He sniggered.

"Dragon Boy?" he laughed. "Hmm. That'll work. Should I get T-shirts made up?"

"Naw-I prefers caps!" I shot back. "Gothi's got my Finals papers and I need to pass them if I'm to stay here." I clambered back onto the bed and sat, cross-legged, gesturing to the papers, folders and books. He stiffly leaned forward and picked up my folder.

"Can I help?" he asked. I shrugged. My mind was buzzing with facts and figures, lists and differentials. I waved at the folder and he opened at a random page.

His glorious emerald eyes scanned the page, flicking over my messy scrawl and he took a quick sip of the cooling coffee. He nodded. "Okay. Name three features of Graves Disease…" he asked me. I closed my eyes and recalled the page…
I woke very early and was showered, dressed and breakfasted in good time for deployment with Lieutenant Ragnar, Gothi's senior assistant. We were to provide medical support for the training exercise and we shot across the icy ground towards the observation point in a nicely inconspicuous jeep. It was really cold and though we were bundled up warmly, my face was freezing as we skidded round another corner. Behind us, a truck rumbled along sedately, carrying Toothless, his Rider and the General. A further jeep of observers followed them.

Hiccup had been allowed to come—but only because they had put one on of those ankle tags they use on criminals. Toothless had been injected with four different trackers in various spots over body to prevent the dragon and his rider easily removing them. Hiccup had been unhappy at the act and had protested but had been told bluntly he would never see his dragon again if he protested any more and he had subsided, though he looked withdrawn and guilty again.

We parked up on a outlook on the road through the glen and I leapt out of the jeep, grabbing some binoculars and scanning the sky. I heard Ragnar chuckle: he knew I was a Rider as well and had already told me that I could watch the action with Hiccup-provided I snapped back to medical duties if there were casualties. The words chilled me a little: it was a sobering thought that casualties in a training exercise were a frequent occurrence. Then I heard the truck pull up and I turned to see the door being opened and Toothless jumped lightly down to the ground, arching his back and stretching like a giant cat. Hiccup clumsily hopped down the steps from the cabin and he landed badly, his leg buckling. I started forward but Toothless was quicker and Hiccup gratefully caught his dragon and leaned on him heavily until his crutches were handed to him. "Thanks, bud," he murmured. Then I arrived and grinned at him.

"See?" I told him smugly. "I told you they would need you!" He gave me a slight smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"They need him," he sighed, stroking the Night Fury, who looked up at me with big green eyes. He gave a little croon and I gave him a pat as well. Then Hiccup looked me up and down. "Excited?" he guessed. I nodded. My stomach was dancing and I felt so edgy. I could barely keep still and kept searching the sky for the other riders: I couldn't help it. This was what I had become and I was really eager to see them in action for the first time. They had been really impressive when they had rescued Hiccup but it had been almost dark and I had actually seen very little. He pushed himself up onto his crutches and moved carefully to my side, nudging me. He handed me a small earphone/mike and I fitted it into my ear so I could hear and speak to the riders. He showed me how to activate the transmit facility though I left mine on receive only: I was just an observer, as he was. He smiled at my expression: I must've looked like a child on Christmas morning.

"They'll come over the western flank of the mountain," he murmured, gesturing. I shivered so he pulled me closer and leaned against me, his arm wrapping around my shoulders. His contact and warmth was reassuring. "Watch and observe," he said gently. "Tell me what you see, Astrid. Not what you think you should see but what you actually see. Flying a dragon isn't like a combat aircraft. They handle differently, they have minds of their own and they are infinitely more manoeuvrable. And the pilots on most of them...wouldn't pass the psych evaluation for any air force in the world!"

"Snotlout?"

"Actually, I was thinking...the twins," he suggested. The ones on that two headed dragon...what was is...Hideous Zippleback? Wow, the Ministry of Stupid Names was working overtime! Ah-the
screaming, cursing, head-banging blonde boy-girl pair…

"I think you're right," I murmured, leaning back against him. It was cold and he was only in his jeans, shirt and leather jacket. I had a military issue cold weather jacket, woolly hat and gloves and I was still cold: he must have been freezing. I checked my watch: 0703. They were late.

And then there was a loud whooping from overhead and I rolled my eyes as the cry sounded: Snotlout! Snotlout! Oi! Oi! Oi! I caught Hiccup's expression and he looked as exasperated as I felt. "Stealth mode, right?" I murmured and felt him chuckle against me.

"Oh, that's not the worst," he murmured as a phalanx of dragons soared low overhead: two of the spiky Snotlout types-Monstrous Nightmares-and a huge heavy iridescent dragon that strongly resembled a giant flying beetle with Eret sitting smugly on his back. The Nightmares burst into flames and all three roared loudly. "That's Snotlout's idea of stealth mode," Hiccup murmured, wincing. I could see his point: his dragon was dark, sleek, undoubtedly stealthy and very streamlined. Whoever deployed these dragons wasn't thinking tactically. Well, it had been Snotlout so was anyone surprised? He pointed across the glen where a dragon was lying on its side, giving pathetic whimpering roars. "The downed dragon: this is a rescue scenario." I looked at him: I thought he had been replaced as leader for the moment. He caught my expression. "I was asked to propose a number of various scenarios for training exercises. This is one I came up with…well, it was until Snotlout took it over. Gods only know what he'll do with it now."

"Blow it up?" I suggested, frowning. The phalanx were swooping over the downed dragon, which seemed to be changing colours and whining, pretending it had an injured leg. I frowned and peered through the binoculars: I hadn't seen one of those before but could recognise the small and fidgety shape of Cami, dressed in a sleek bodysuit that matched her dragon. She was shouting up at the swooping dragons and her body language showed she was really pissed. Her dragon lumbered to its feet and started roaring at the 'rescuers'. Hiccup face-palmed.

"I see the rescue is going amazingly well," he groaned.

At this point, a second phalanx of dragons zoomed in: the twins on the Zippleback, a large red dragon with 'Dogsbreath' Donald on and a very sleek silver dragon with a lithe shape lying low over the long neck in a stunning matching silver bodysuit. "Heather on Windshear," Hiccup murmured in my ear. "She's actually very good-a far better leader than Snotlout." They circled round over the 'downed' dragon and attacked the 'rescuers'. I gaped and sought askance from Hiccup-but he looked as puzzled as me. He pulled away and leaned towards Toothless.

"What's going on, bud?" he asked. The dragon gave a little croon and made a confused warbling noise. Hiccup shook his head as a loud explosion sounded across the glen and a tree exploded. Hiccup's eyes narrowed and guessed Snotlout had decided to 'change it up' and make the scenario stupidly dangerous and chaotic. Another explosion nearly blew up the 'downed' dragon and immediately there seemed to be a free for all. I could hear copious swearing and recriminations over the com-link and guessed the plan was really going well. Cami and her 'downed' dragon mounted up and joined the fray. There was no discipline in the com chatter so I was struggling to recognise any of the voices. I watched in confusion and wondered what was going on. Then the General stomped heavily over to us and I could almost hear him scowling.

"This is not what I asked for," he growled and glared at his son. Hiccup glanced up, folding his arms.

"I wouldn't know," he replied sarcastically, "since I’m no longer in charge and have had my flight privileges revoked. So I have no clue what your plan was for this exercise. But if you put Snotlout in charge, this is exactly what you were always going to get."
"And you couldn't have said something?" the General asked him accusingly.

"When was I supposed to do that?" Hiccup retorted. "You grounded me and removed me from leading the riders. I was deliberately excluded from the exercise and any of the planning."

"But I thought you would have interfered anyway…" Stoick growled at him.

"When?" Hiccup snapped. "Between being confined to the brig or hit over the head by idiots interrupting my training session?" Another tree exploded and a herd of sheep stampeded down the glen.

"And you couldn't have given me a warning, son? Say…'Snotlout will cause World War Three if you put him in charge of the exercise, Dad'?’" Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"Have you actually watched ANY of our exercises?" he asked in surprise. "This is totally what happens EVERY time." He turned to the Night Fury. "Bud-call 'em to order!" And the Night Fury gave a huge roar that suddenly stopped all the dragons. They hung in the air, hovering and every head turned to the black shape sitting on the opposite side of the glen. "LAND! NOW!" Hiccup bellowed, clicking his com-link to transmit and the dragons all landed, despite the chorus of jeering and cursing that echoed from the Riders. He folded his arms and glared at them, then turned to the General. "All yours," he said sarcastically and turned away, unsteadily making his way to an outlook marker and leaning gratefully against it. He grimaced and I could see his leg was paining him. The General stomped down the path and began shouting at the riders as I walked alongside Hiccup.

"Is this how exercises usually work?" I asked in confusion. He sighed.

"Um, yes," he admitted. "Though usually there is a plan for the scenario and some attempt to keep them in line." He rubbed his neck awkwardly. "Or, to be more accurate, I usually keep them in line." The General was shouting at Snotlout and the Monstrous Nightmare Rider was replying with complete self-confidence and almost certainly a massive dose of self-delusion. He was gesturing towards us and I guessed he was trying to blame Hiccup for the disaster. I caught a snippet of his smug tones:

"…if Useless hadn't landed us with this dumb-ass scenario…I could have formulated a much better exercise…"

I frowned and wondered what kind of amateur set-up I had gotten myself into. I was used to military precision and totally efficiency. I opened my mouth to comment when I heard a rumble of thunder overhead and groaned. It was freezing and the wind felt arctic. The weather was really screwed up as the skies suddenly darkened and thunder rumbled again. Hiccup's head snapped up and he looked alarmed, his eyes widening. Lightning crackled across the sky and he jerked bolt upright.

"Oh crap," he murmured. "Dagur."

Lightning knotted the dark grey skies and illuminated a dragon that flapped into view, roaring a ferocious challenge. The creature looked fierce, a combination of dark grey and purple with a shape perched on its neck. Two dragons flapped up to flank it: another one of the red dragons and a dark green and amber Nadder, far larger than Stormfly. Toothless scrambled to his feet, his back arched and tail flicking angrily. His eyes narrowed and his pupils slitted. He let out a shattering roar of challenge which the grey and purple dragon returned. I stared at him and at Hiccup, who had clenched his fists.
"Get back," he said in a low voice. "That dragon is dangerous." He stumbled over to Toothless and laid a hand on his shoulders. "Get them in the air, bud. They're sitting ducks on the ground." The Night Fury roared and they dragons all startled, then rose like rockets. "DISPERSE! PATTERN B!" Hiccup shouted over the com and the Riders all split, swooping a tight formation and heading for the low cloud layers that just skimmed the tops of the mountains. The General stared up at the lightning-swatthed dragon and lifted his wrist com, barking orders. Lightning crackled and the grey and purple dragon—the Skrill that had attacked Hiccup and taken his leg—swooped round then began to arrow down towards the General, who turned and ran. Hiccup stared for a second, then swung into the saddle. I ran forward.

"Is this wise?" I asked him urgently, recalling all the trouble from the previous day. He gave me a little smile.

"Almost certainly not," he said, "but I gotta do it anyway. That's my Dad and my team."

"Take care!" I murmured and stood back as he leaned forward and gave a smile. "Let's go, bud!" he said and the dragon gave a huge flap of his wings and shot into the air. Toothless banked sharply and gave a loud roar, then accelerated towards the Skrill, challenging the other dragon. It was clear that there was no love lost between the two dragons. But Dagur was targeting the General and I felt my heart in my mouth as the dragon drew itself up and fired at him.

There was an explosion and the General dived aside, scrambling up. But Toothless opened his mouth and fired a ball of purple fire at the Skrill, the impact slamming it aside. Hiccup guided his dragon directly over the Skrill, shouting a challenge at Dagur as he passed. I saw the traitor's head snap up and he let out a scream, then followed the Night Fury up. But the Skrill's companions swooped down and they began chasing the others. The riders were in disarray, scattering until Heather swooped round, shouted at them and they reluctantly fell into line behind her. I peered through the binoculars and gasped: the hostiles on the attacking dragons were pointing weapons at the riders.

Hiccup was dodging wildly as lightning arched around them. I could hear him muttering. "Come on, buddy—that's it…that was close…" Then the Skrill ducked away and went after his father again and the Night Fury arrowed down, diving between the General and his attacker and blocking the explosion of lighting with his own purple blast. The General ducked away as the Skrill was blasted backwards. Without delay, Hiccup flipped Toothless round and grabbed his father, the huge man hanging from the dragon's from paws as he swooped overhead and dropped him by me. The General stared up at him as the Night Fury flapped slowly, hovering before him.

"You really can't follow orders, boy!" he growled.

"Stay back!" Hiccup shouted in reply. "You can do whatever you want after this but get the reserves in. We need to drive them back. Alvin wouldn't have Dagur attack without some kind of a plan—and I can't see it yet. Something has still got to go down!" Stoick nodded as his son cast me a quick look. "Stay back and stay safe!" he called.

"You too!" I replied as he whipped away. He threw the dragon into a tight turn, his hands clamped onto the saddle and lying almost flat against the dragon's neck. The General was muttering as he watched the young man zoom up to engage the Skrill again.

"Stupid stubborn bone-headed insubordinate…" he muttered. "Reserves—Fishlegs, Mulch, Bucket—get in there!" But as I watched, the Skrill attacked Toothless once more and Hiccup and his dragon were blasted back. They flipped and zipped round to block the Skrill again as the others attacked the Riders. The red dragon was roaring and spitting some steaming green fluid at Cami's multicoloured dragon and the Zippleback. They dodged but the spit seemed to be melting the
ground and rocks it landed on: it seemed to be some seriously caustic liquid. Snotlout and Gustav were dodging the Nadder, which was firing spines at them from its tail and I watched closely, trying to work out how this was controlled: I assumed this was a talent Stormfly would possess.

"Hello, brother!" The voice over the com was familiar-almost like Ozzie-but the intonation and edge was wrong: this was Dagur speaking. Involuntarily, I shuddered and turned my attention back to the lightning swathed dragon. Thunder rumbled overhead.

"Still not your brother, Dagur," Hiccup shouted back. "What do you want? You know you're outnumbered!"

"Not for long, brother! You could always join us voluntarily?"

"Tempting as it sounds, I'd rather eat my other leg!" Hiccup shot back.

"Or Deathwing could do it for you!"

"Not sure Toothless would approve," Hiccup growled, his dragon hovering and the growl the Night Fury gave was audible over the com.

"Oh, I can change his mind!" Dagur sneered as the Skrill lashed out with lightning and blasted Cami and Dogsbreath back. Hiccup shouted a warning as Heather swooped down and tried to intercept the traitor but was blasted back as well.

"Leave him to me!" he shouted. "Take care of the others!" Toothless roared as Dagur whipped around and soared up, the Night Fury in hot pursuit. But as they reached the cloud bank, the Skrill did a tight loop-the-loop and Dagur swooped past Toothless, raising a weapon and firing two shots. Toothless instinctively dinked to protect Hiccup-and the darts embedded deep in his belly. I gasped as they flipped over and tried to face the Skrill again. But suddenly, Toothless was fighting his rider and I heard Hiccup struggling.

"What is it, bud?" I heard him call. The dragon gave a roar and shot directly upwards, the Skrill in hot pursuit. And then I heard the explosion.
The clouds overhead lit with brilliant pinkish lightning and another explosion sounded. Two dragons exploded from the clouds, tumbling in opposite directions. One was the Skrill with Dagur hanging on while the other was the jet shape of Toothless, writhing and bucking as Hiccup tried to wrestle him back under control. I could hear him cursing as his broken hand and healing ribs were wrenched by the violent ride and I swung my binoculars up.

Toothless was bucking and fighting, swerving across the sky and I could see his auburn head snap as they wrenched side to side. "TOOTHLESS! BAD DRAGON!" he shouted and I tried not to smile: it was such a ridiculous admonishment to a ferocious and out of control extinct mythological creature. I could hear the General shift his weight beside me: he was clearly angry.

"GET OUT OF THERE!" he shouted down the com and the other Riders tried to obey—but the Red acid-spitting dragon swung round, his edges blurring against the roiling sky. Seriously? The damned thing could camouflage as well? I saw a muzzle-flash against the darkening sky and another and I frowned as the dragon swooped up, leaving the Riders in disarray. Snotlout and Gustav's dragons burst into flame and I gasped. I later learned that their bodysuits were flameproof and heat shielded which was the only thing preventing them from being cremated as the dragons both went wild and began to attack the others.

The Skrill fired again, lightning scorching across the skirmishing dragons. Hiccup gave an incoherent shout as they dodged and I saw him wrench the Night Fury's head round to face the Skrill. The Night Fury growled as he recognised his enemy and he barrelled towards the purple and grey dragon, roaring fiercely.

"Oh brother—you really should up my offer!" Dagger sneered over the com.

"Kinda busy right now, Dagur. Howsabout we talk after you're in jail?"

"From what I hear, you'll be in there with me. Care to warm my sheets?"

"Ugh! I'm volunteering for solitary confinement!"

"Can I join in?" Eret's sneering voice butted in as the huge beetle-like dragon swooped between the two. His armour seemed to shrug off the arching lightning as he had his own dragon launch a fireball at the Skrill. "Hey, Dagur! Why don't you fight a real soldier—not that scrawny clown!" The grey and purple dragon dodged and gave a furious roar. Hiccup waved an arm furiously.

"Get out the Loki-damned way!" he snarled. "The only way I can keep Toothless is focussed is on the Skrill! Oh crap…" And then the Night Fury roared and suddenly rocketed up into the clouds, writhing and bucking against the saddle and his Rider.

As I watched, I saw a lumpy brown dragon with a cute face and a club-like tail zoom in with a very bulky rider perched upright on its back. I was shocked to recognise Fishlegs in an unflattering brown bodysuit and he bravely cut between the fighting Monstrous Nightmares to calm things down. Behind him, a strange dragon with a bulbous body, white out eyes and a long, spine-laden, whip-like tail circled Gustav's raging dragon and its older Rider—Bucket, I think—shouted at the youngest Rider to get him back in control. The final dragon was all-white, spiny and furious, breathing icy breath at Snotlout's dragon. The Nightmare pounced forward and the two dragons clamped onto each other and rolled, crashing to the glen and rolling on the greyish grass and heather as they fought.
Toothless roared down towards the ground, almost crashing but pulling up at the last minute. Hiccup was being tossed around like a rag doll: I couldn't imagine how he was hanging on. I suspected his prosthesis clamped into the tail assembly helped but it couldn't have been doing his injuries any good. "HEATHER! Can you get Savage back from the others?" He sounded tired but the girl on the silver dragon whipped round and slammed into the large Nadder, driving him away from Cami's dragon. Immediately, Cami and the twins began to shepherd Gustav back and force the enraged dragon to the ground.

"HICCUP!" It was Heather and I saw him snap his head up, stricken as Heather fell from her dragon. He forced Toothless up but the dragon folded its wings and they fell away. My heart was in my mouth as Eret dived away from the Skrill and power-dived, managing to snatch the free-falling rider before she impacted onto the rocky ground.

"Hey, babe," Eret called. "You good?"

"Get me up there!" the girl called and shouted for her dragon. The two red dragons seemed to be having a private battle and I could hear cursing over the com. Heather was flipped back onto her dragon and she accelerated up towards the attackers. Snotlout's dragon was rolling with the white dragon, his flaming skin setting fire to heather and grass. A volley of Nadder spines scorched down and the sky suddenly flashed with lightning once more. The Riders all stared up as Hiccup wrestled Toothless round to face the Skrill once more.

"Break off!" he shouted. "Fall back and regroup: by the numbers!" There was a burst of cursing and protests across the coms but the dragons fell back and hovered, facing the three intruders. Hiccup glared at the Skrill. "Eret, Bucket, Fishlegs-keep Hookfang and Fanghook apart and down!" He wrenched the Night Fury up to hover opposite the Skrill as the three dragons swept down to hold the Monstrous Nightmares apart.

"Well, brother, I see you have a lot of problems," Dagur sneered.

"Cami, Mulch, Ruff'n'Tuff, Dog-keep Savage and Vorg up and back them away from the downed dragons!" he shouted. "Heather-take point and man the perimeter!"

"Hiccup-you're not seriously…" she shouted.

"Do it!" he shouted, hauling back on Toothless. "C'mon, bud. You can beat that dragon, hmm? I believe in you!"

The Night Fury roared fiercely and accelerated at the Skrill, taking Dagur by surprise as the two dragons tumbled and fell from the sky. Dagur was screaming in rage and Hiccup just hung on, feeling his dragon still fighting him. The two dragons were slashing and clawing, hitting the ground and rolling fiercely. His head hit something-I saw his head jerk sideways-and then they split, both dragons roaring furiously.

"You are starting to annoy me!" Dagur sneered. Hiccup leaned forward over Toothless's neck.

"Good," he said breathlessly. "Let's see if I can do any better!" And Toothless lunged again, his claws slashing at the Skrill. Dagur gave a bellow of rage as his dragon roared in pain.

"I will make you pay for that!" he promised as the dragons rolled in combat once more.

Overhead, Cami's camouflaged dragon faded against the sky as the twins' Zippleback swathed the red dragon in green gas. There was a furious roar as they detonated the gas and the red dragon went tumbling backwards, spitting acid that tipped Cami's dragon's wing. It roared in pain and flapped
up, slamming the Nadder aside. Then Bucket's spiny dragon shot a volley of spines at the Nadder and it dinked, then flew away. The dragons formed a wall between the downed Nightmares and the attacking dragons while Heather circled overhead, checking for any changes in tactics or unexpected arrivals. Hiccup and Dagur launched and the dragons faced one another. Hiccup held fiercely onto the saddle.

"Dagur-this is pointless!" he shouted. "Come back: we can talk this out!"

"Well, much as I'd like to waste my time talking for hours with you, brother," Dagur sneered, "I'm gonna have to carry this on another time. But then we can spend all the time we need to really get to know each other!" Hiccup recoiled and Toothless pulled up. The Skrill powered up with another lightning bolt but as the pinkish lightning coiled around them, Hiccup gave a scream as the Nadder wrenched him from Toothless's back.

I could hear him screaming as he tumbled, dropped to dash to his death. Toothless fell from the sky as well, his prosthetic tail collapsing as soon as Hiccup was ripped away from him. Heather swooped round on her silver dragon and grabbed Hiccup by his real leg, banking tightly. "I got you," I heard her say as I saw movement at the crest of the ridge. I focussed my binoculars and frowned. There were men at the top of the ridge and they seemed to be aiming a weapon right at Heather and Hiccup. I flipped my com to transmit and screamed a warning.

"Hofferson! There are armed men on the ridge. Heather-evasive manoeuvres!"

"Get off the com!" Snotlout shouted.

"Evasive manoeuvres!" Heather echoed, Hiccup still dangling from her dragon. They banked left but too late as a metallic net suddenly flew at them and the dragon found itself tangled in the heavy trap. It gave a scream that Heather echoed and tumbled from the sky. Hiccup was jarred loose and fell with a scream as well. Then the Skrill scorched lightning across the protective wall of dragons, scattering them as the Nadder grabbed Heather's dragon.

"Heather!" Eret's voice echoed across the com, but the raven-haired girl was silent and unconscious as the Nadder scored up into the clouds, taking then away. Another volley of lightning scorched across the dragons and they all ducked away as the attackers disappeared. The thunder rolled once more, then died away.

Hiccup looked up, the wind knocked out of him and a lump the size of an egg on his forehead where he had slammed into the ground. He painfully pushed himself up to his knees as Toothless growled and circled the young man. Hiccup faced his dragon and saw his back was arched, his eyes slitted and head down. His throat was beginning to glow with flame. The creature was going to attack him.

"Get down here!" the General bellowed. "Three out of control dragons! Tranq them!" The other observers all grabbed weapons from their jeeps and barrelled down and I ran too, tapping Ragnar as I went: I could see Hiccup was injured. He followed me, bringing the med-kit. The observers rapidly headed for the downed Nightmares while Ragnar, the General and I pounded towards the shape of Hiccup and the roaring Night Fury. Hiccup staggered to his feet, his eyes locked on the dragon.

"Stay back!" he shouted.

"That dragon is out of control!" Stoick shouted, raising his weapon.

"NO! Dragon Training is all about trust!" Hiccup cried. "You've already tranquillised him once and
if you do it again, you may destroy that forever. I can get through to him. I trust him!"

"He'll kill you!" Stoick shouted.

"No, he won't!" Hiccup told him with utter confidence and limped unsteadily forward, his hand raised unthreateningly. "Come back to me, bud," he murmured. "It's my fault. I left you alone because I thought it would make you safer. I got you captured again-and then I wasn't allowed to see you. It's all my fault, bud. And I am so, so sorry." He limped a further step forward. "I trust you, bud. Come back to me…"

The dragon growled and Stoick's hand tightened on his weapon but I shook my head.

"Give him a chance, sir," I murmured, recalling the image of the boy hugging his dragon after such a long absence. The love between them was very obvious. "I think he can do it."

"If that creature goes for him, I'll shoot it," he growled but he lowered the muzzle slightly. His wide green eyes locked with the dragon's slitted green orbs, Hiccup closed his hand to a few inches of the muzzle. "Come back to me, bud," he murmured, his emotion thick in his voice. "I know this isn't you, bud. I know you can fight it. Fight to come back to me, buddy. You're my best friend. My best friend."

I was frozen, holding my breath as the dragon's back relaxed and his pupils dilated. The growl died and the glow of fire in his throat faded as he pressed his blunt muzzle into the shaking hand. Hiccup took a very shaky step forward and threw his arms around the dragon. Toothless gave a gentle, rumbling croon and opened his mouth in a gummy smile as Hiccup clung to him, his lanky shape swaying with weariness.

"Attaboy," he murmured. "You never cease to amaze me." Stoick lowered his gun completely and his eyes widened in shock.

"No more than you do, son," he breathed. Hiccup looked up quietly and gave the slightest smile. There was blood smeared over the gash on his forehead and he looked very pale, but there was the slightest triumph in his tired eyes.

"Thanks, Dad," he murmured. But Eret and his dragon were galloping forward, his face enraged. Hiccup stared at him in shock and recoiled, his hand remaining against his dragon for support. "E-Eret?" he murmured. "Wh-what?" The larger man closed to a few inches and glared into Hiccup's face.

"They've got Heather!" he shouted.
It was a lot later when I found Hiccup in the IT lab, hunched over a screen, occasionally making a scrawled note on a scruffy pad with a pencil. His damaged left hand hadn't improved his writing any since that note in my apartment-which was folded and tucked safely in my laptop in my room here. He was more dishevelled than usual, his auburn mop wild and leather jacket slung askew over the back of his chair. His green check shirt was rumpled with sleeves rolled up to the elbows. I knew he had scooted from the infirmary as soon as his cuts and bruises had been treated. Gothi had wanted to look at his leg but he had refused. And he hadn't visited the Mess Hall.

I walked up to him and quietly laid down a plate and a mug: shepherd's pie and coffee. He glanced up, surprised, as they hit the desk and I blinked. He must have been concentrating very hard to miss me wandering in with my gifts.

"Don't worry-I didn't cook it," I reassured him. He gave me a faint smile, his forest green eyes wide with gratitude then tucked in ravenously: he had to be starving after the battle but he had headed straight here, neglecting himself with impressive determination.

"Thanks," he mumbled. I perched on the seat next to him, sipping my own cup of coffee and watching him shovel the food down. I smiled as he paused to chew and took a long sip of his coffee. Then he sat back in his chair and stretched, his shoulders and neck audibly cracking. He must have been cramped over the screen for hours. I inspected him: he looked very tired, the ugly bump on his head steristripped only. He must have had a headache from that blow but he had just compounded it by staring at screens for hours on end. I stole a glance and saw three screens all displaying high definition scans of ancient papers, all covered in Norse runes and a few crude diagrams.

"What're you doing?" I asked him, frowning. He scraped the last mouthful from his plate and swallowed quickly.

"These are scans of the Bork papers, the ancient wisdom pertaining to dragons," he explained tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "The dragons went crazy today, just like Stormfly did in her pen. Then, the drug that hit her was an extract of Dragon Root-a plant that makes dragons hyper-aggressive and uncontrollable. I was just looking to see if he had anything about an antidote or some form of prevention…"


"Technically, it's referred to as Norse but yeah," he admitted. "Though it's more reading rather than speaking…"

"Wait-is this some qualification no one remembered to tell me about…along with a stupid name and dubious sanity?" I retorted. He gave a small smile.

"Well, Milady, I can't vouch for the sanity thing because I'm pretty sure that I am sane, but no,
Norse is not required," he replied with gentle sarcasm. "Definitely hit the name qualification, though."

"Thank goodness," I murmured. "Dragon Root?"

"Dracoradix calamitosus," he explained. I frowned.

"Have you tried the World Botanical Database?" I asked him. He blinked at me and stared dumbly. "Well, I suspect botanical knowledge may have moved on in the past thousand years since this was written…” He stared at me. "You mean all you've been doing is reading ancient papers?"

He suddenly looked embarrassed and blushed. He buried his face in his hands.

"Gods," he murmured. "How much more useless could I be?" I grasped his arm, squeezing to reassure him.

"Hiccup-my room mate in first year was doing a Biology and Pharmacology degree and she used this thing all the time," I explained. "Apparently plants are the most promising source for all new drugs. So she was trawling through this damn thing for hours and she never shut up about it. I'd never heard of it because it doesn't come up in medicine. And I guess it's not big in the IT world either." He managed a wan smile.

"That's for sure," he murmured tiredly but his fingers danced over the keyboard, his commands exchanging a screen of ancient runes for the database. He interrogated it over the plant and a neat entry scrolled up. He read in sudden excitement and then called up related species and began to make notes. "Thanks, Astrid," he added and his voice was lighter. I smiled.

"You're welcome," I told him, "but aren't there other people employed to do this? Say...people with experience of pharmacological weapons and veterinary biochemistry?" He looked embarrassed.

"They can't read the Bork papers-actually only four of us can read Ancient Norse-so I kinda got assigned the job," he admitted. I frowned.

"So why are you-Dragon Boy-doing this when you have a load of other duties?" I asked tartly. He grimaced.

"Let me think. Caring for my dragon-whoops, forbidden to see him. Riding my dragon-nope, grounded. Leading the Riders-oh, forgot...replaced by Snotlout.” His tone was impressively sarcastic.

"That went well," I murmured. He winced.

"So what else do I have to do?"

"Train me?" I asked him gently. He sighed.

"Yeah, when Stormfly's wing is okay..." he murmured. "Unless you want someone else..." I shook my head firmly. "Maybe we can try again in a couple of days..."

"And I bet you don't get paid three people's salaries either," I suggested. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Room and board only, I guess," he muttered in an embarrassed tone. Oh yes-he came here as a seventeen year old, fresh from High School and dragged from his home, halfway round the world and into the middle of nowhere by his father. I guessed getting paid would be the last thing on his
mind. I rolled my eyes.

"Cheap for an IT whizz kid," I commented.

"About right for a prize screw up," he retorted despondently and drained his coffee.

"Will you stop that!" I snapped. "You were an observer this morning, like me. You disobeyed orders to go up and save your father and try to protect your friends! The team is massively dysfunctional and was completely out of control. You, at least, got them working in a coordinated manner. You are not to blame!" He shook his head and I already knew he was blaming himself. How could one man, not even allowed to be part of the planning for the stupid exercise, be so willing to take the blame for the disaster? And then I realised: his father. Stoick must have really screwed with his head when he put his son in charge for him to feel this bad. For him to expect to feel this bad. "And you should be resting. I think you had a pretty busy day!" I added sharply. He looked up and his face was serious.

"Astrid—we were ambushed and got our asses whipped," he said directly. "They incapacitated two of us and I barely hung onto Toothless. And they got Heather and Windshear. Dagur got Heather." He sighed. "Gods alone know how I can explain this to Ozzie." He quietly ran his hands through his hair and then I saw it: the little cluster of white scars across the soft inside of his right wrist. Each was similar to the next, all precise cuts made by a sharp object. And all were old and healed. I paused and stared. He read my expression, followed my gaze and then clutched his arm against his chest, tugging his rolled up sleeve down to hide them. I could almost hear his gaze slam onto the desk.

"Hiccup?" I asked. He gave a pained smile.

"Don't worry—I was a long time ago," he assured me. "And only a short time before I realised it didn't help at all. I'm fine, Astrid. Don't worry about me." He had read my shock. How had I missed those? Is there anything else I should know? I shook myself out of it.

"Hiccup?"

"Honestly. I was just going through a really bad time: Dad was away on a mission and hadn't bothered to arrange anyone to look after me, I was being bullied to Hel and I ended up beaten up and in the Emergency Room. I'd run out of money and food and the washing machine broke so I was basically starving and wearing dirty clothes as well as being underage and living alone. Then Family Services decided I was abandoned and couldn't find a foster family so they stuck me in a home. Yeah, that went well. I was only there for about two months but what they did...how I felt...I thought it would help. I was wrong."

"If you ever need to talk, I'm here," I reminded him, my heart aching for him. "That's what friends are for." He grimaced.

"Not really had much practice with them either," he murmured. I smiled and looked across the screens.

"Seriously? Well, that's gonna change!" I said firmly. "You and I are going to have a serious talk, Dragon Boy, about social interactions and peer support." He groaned.


"And when are you going to get some rest?" I asked him. "You've been up since before dawn and involved in the mess—and you weren't even running the damned exercise!"
"Yeah-so Snotlout's gonna step up and take any blame-NOT," he retorted sharply. "No matter what they say, I am still the team leader," he added softly, his face shadowed with weariness. "I'm always to blame. Dagur wanted me. I should have just let him take me!"

"You tried that," I reminded him. "We got you back, you idiot, because losing you and Toothless isn't an option."

"And nor is losing Heather and Windshear," he sighed. "I wanted to be the one to tell Ozzie but my Dad insisted. I'm suspended anyway but Ozzie is staff: they reckoned he deserved the General, not Useless. Ozzie is her next of kin-their parents died a coupla years back-and he deserved to be treated like any other relative where we lose a Rider."

"And have you? Lost one before?" I asked, suddenly feeling goosebumps.

"Three," he said grimly. "Dagur, Savage and Vorg. They're alive-and so is Heather. Dagur is insane but he values her. He seems to want to protect her and I guess he'll try to recruit her. Heather is smart and quick: I doubt she'll betray us but I worry what they will do to her dragon. A Razorwhip is a quick and powerful dragon: an ideal strike weapon. I-I just don't know what to do next. It's clear someone told them where we'd be. There is a traitor in BERK."

"HICCUP!" The door slammed open and Ozzie stormed in. His rather buff shape was tensed, his fists bunched and pale green eyes flashing with anger. He looked alarmingly like Dagur, to be honest and Hiccup rose painfully to his feet, a look of alarm on his face. "I thought I'd find you hiding here!"

"Ozzie, I…" Hiccup began before Ozzie punched him. I froze in shock as Hiccup staggered back, his hand flying to his face as he slumped against the desk.

"You should have told me yourself!" Ozzie snarled though I knew he hadn't been allowed by the General. Maybe he had forgotten his son was friends with Ozzie. "I trusted you! I knew you would protect her!" Hiccup looked up, his green eyes dark with hurt. He carefully pushed himself back to his feet.

"Ozzie-I'm truly sorry. I did everything I could," he said quietly. "The team was in disarray. Toothless was out of control as were Hookfang and Fanghook. Heather was flying point and she was captured and snatched by your brother. There was nothing any of us could do. As soon as they snatched her, they were gone."

Ozzie lurched forward, his fist swinging again and Hiccup made no move to dodge the blow. "And now he's got her!" he shouted at the bowed shape.

"Dagur cares for Heather," Hiccup said slowly, raising his face and touching his hand to his mouth: there was fresh blood. "He won't let her be hurt."

"She's all I've got left!" Ozzie shouted at him, the fury on his voice scary. "Dagur killed our parents. I found that little fact out after we were here. I tried to keep her away from him but he has always wanted to protect his little sister and he insinuated himself into her life. Gods alone know what he'll do to her!"

"He won't let her be hurt," Hiccup insisted.

"And if she is…I will hold you solely responsible!" Ozzie said, his voice suddenly deadly calm.

"Too late. I already do," Hiccup replied, slowly straightening up to face him. His face was suddenly very pale, his breaths calm and even. There was self-loathing in his voice. Ozzie took a
long pace forward and glared into Hiccup's face. There was only rage in Ozzie's pale green eyes, very different from the warm greeting I had first met.

"If you need to hand yourself over to get her back, then you fucking do it!" he snarled. "I don't care what the Hel he does to you as long as you get my sister back!" Then he turned and stormed out. I stared and then turned back to Hiccup, who had slid down into his seat. I could see his hands shaking as he leaned forward on his elbows and pressed his face into his hands. I took a pace towards him.

"Please leave me," he said quietly. "Astrid…please…"

I turned away, hearing his breaths grow heavy and irregular and I recalled how alone he must be feeling. How this lanky and quiet young man was was utterly lacking in self-confidence but was a different person when he was with his dragon. How he had calmed an enraged and out of control dragon just with his voice. How he had been undermined and abused by almost everyone-and how his closest friend had basically just threatened him and told him to hand himself over to someone who had already horribly tortured him. I turned back.

He was bowed, slumped with his head still buried in his hands and shoulders shaking. He looked utterly miserable and I knew he didn't need to be alone. He shouldn't be alone. So I closed the distance to him, wrapping my arms around him and pulling against me. He didn't resist at all, burying his face in my chest and wrapping his arms tightly around me. I could feel him shuddering and I leaned forward to nuzzle against the top of his head,

"You don't need to be alone," I said softly. "You've been alone for far too long. I'm here." But all he could say, his voice hoarse and broken was:

"It's my fault."
I took him back to his room: he was exhausted mentally and physically. I doubted he could process anything at that point, let alone what Ozzie had said to him. But I felt my heart sink at the anger: it hadn't been Hiccup's fault but Dagur's. Surely Ozzie knew that! Yet he had gone for the easy option of blaming Hiccup, which seemed to be the default in this place.

He was limping badly on his crutches and he was silent. I could see he just wanted to be alone and I felt awkward walking him to his room but I was feeling really worried for him. He had been so desolate, so wounded that I really didn't want to leave him and I worried what he would do. I guessed all his good coping mechanisms—spending time with his dragon, flying with Toothless—had been taken from him. So I walked silently alongside, hoping he would say something to allay my anxieties for him. But he limped along in silence until we reached his room—and I found he was housed only about half a corridor from my room. I noted his room number carefully: I was going to have to keep an eye on him. He paused at the door and he wouldn't meet my eye.

"Thanks," was all he said before limping in and closing the door. I heard the lock turn and a couple of halting steps. And then the scream. Again and again he screamed and then there was crashes and thuds as he took out every emotion on the contents of his room. I had no idea what he was doing in there but I knew he didn't want me with him. So, reluctantly, I walked away.

I didn't sleep well. I had my written Finals to do in the morning and my revision schedule was shot to hell. I knew there was no point cramming now so instead I woke up early, went for a run, showered, snatched a quick breakfast and sat my first paper immediately after. I was invigilated carefully as I submitted my answers. I had half an hour break with a coffee and a muffin (blueberry), then sat the second and final paper. By lunchtime, I was done. Which was a good thing because I was on my way for a well-needed meal when Gobber found me and looked worried.

"Where've yer been, lassie?" he asked in a whisper which people I the next corridor could hear. I sighed.

"Medical Degree Finals," I explained. He blinked.

"Er, well, good luck," he said hopelessly late. "We've bin looking for ye. The team is debriefing on the exercise in..." He checked his watch. "...NOW in the seminar room. D'ye remember where that was?"

"Er, Gobber, I was just an observer," I reminded him. He sighed.

"Yer a trained observer, lass, and yer don't have an agenda," he sighed. "Also, though I don't think anyone has mentioned it, ye actually have the highest rank in the unit. Just thought I'd put it out there...just in case..." I rolled my eyes.

"Gobber, what is this all about?" I asked him. He sighed.

"Speak to the boy, will ye?" he asked in a concerned voice. "He looks like death warmed over." I could believe that so I trotted off, down the stairs and slid into the seminar room, which was already noisy and filled with the sounds of several arguments being conducted at the top of
people's voices. I took a seat at the back and watched as Snotlout sat arrogantly at the front, with Hiccup reluctantly seated at his side, looking like a sacrificial lamb, a perfect scapegoat.

I could see what Gobber meant. He looked awful: pale, bruised, gaunt and with huge dark circles under his eyes. He was unshaven and his clothes—the same ones from last night—were rumpled. Snotlout preened himself and slammed his fist on the table.

"Shut up, you lot!" he sneered. "Time to debrief that Odin-damned disaster that happened yesterday." I sighed. He really didn't have a clue. "I'll go first. We were conducting the rescue scenario, Cami was doing really well when Dagur turned up, then Useless came in, confused the dragons and got Heather captured."

I blinked. Maybe Snotlout had missed everything because he was being lightly incinerated by his own dragon or he really was that stupid. But the other Riders were all shouting as well and there seemed to be collective amnesia that was starting to concern me. Hiccup seemed to curl in on himself at the words. And I knew what he would say before he opened his mouth.

"It was my fault," he said hopelessly.

"She wouldn't have been in danger if she didn't have to rescue you from that damned Night fury!" Eret shouted.

"Yeah—you weren't even in on the exercise!" Ruffnut, the female twin sneered.

"Suspended, dude!" Tuffnut, her twin brother called.

"We were doing fine without you!" Cami added.

"Couldn't resist butting in!" Dogsbreath sneered. "Had to show off to Daddy!"

Like that ever worked for him, I thought growing angrier by the minute. This wasn't how a debriefing went! I had done plenty on training exercises over the last four years and I guessed this bunch of imbeciles basically did what they wanted. No wonder Gobber had sent me in here. I clenched my fist. I had dutifully gone back to my room after I had been given the all clear and ensured everything was under control in the infirmary after the exercise and I had carefully written out everything I saw. My notes were logged on my address on the BERK mainframe ready for anyone to ask. I doubted anyone else had bothered. Or that anyone would bother to look for my statement.

"So why did you feel you had to interfere, Useless?" Snotlout sneered. Hiccup glanced up.

"You mean that brawl was how the exercise was intended to go?" he asked pointedly. "Or was losing control of your and Gustav's dragons all part of your great master plan?"

"You lost control of Toothless as well!" Snotlout retorted.

"But he still fought Dagur and Deathwing while your dragons rolled around and tried to eat each other!" Hiccup snapped back. "Oh—are your dragons still unconscious from being tranquillised? I managed to talk mine down. Strange that!"

"And while you were talking to your precious dragon, Heather was captured!" Cami snapped. "Swiftsoar was hurt. Both Fanghook and Hookfang are unconscious. Oggy, the Whispering Death and Blanche the Snowwraith are both injured from fighting with your dragons. Meatlug has a slash from Savage's Nadder. Windshear is missing. It was a total disaster."
"And you took over as soon as you flew in, Useless!" Snotlout sneered, happily absolving himself of blame. "So it really is your fault!"

"Not arguing," Hiccup muttered.

"You ordered us to break off when we were winning!" Tuffnut protested. Winning? Hmm, don't recall that!

"You took me off Dagur and put me on Snotlout!" Eret snarled.

"We needed powerful dragons to keep Fanghook and Hookfang down!" Hiccup said softly. "Skullcrusher is relatively resistant to flame and heavy enough to pin Hookfang."

"So you say!" Gustav sneered.

"I accept responsibility for my actions," Hiccup said quietly. "I didn't start the fight. I joined in when you were stuck in a free-for all and my father had to call you to order."

"You made us sitting ducks!" Dogsbreath snarled. "You almost got us ALL killed!"

And I suppose that Dagur, Savage and Vorg didn't actually turn up and cause the whole thing. They didn't attack the dragons and shoot three of them. They didn't attack the General. They didn't engage Hiccup and Toothless. And they didn't bring helpers to bring down Windshear and capture Heather.

"If anything happens to my babe…" Eret growled and rose, scrambling onto the stage and lunging at Hiccup. He blanched and I guessed he knew what was coming. From his expression, he almost welcomed it. My mind slithered back to those scars. I rose to my feet.

"STAND DOWN, CORPORAL!" I yelled. Eret turned to me with a sneer.

"Keep out of this, sweet-cheeks. This is men's business!" he sneered patronisingly enough to make my blood boil and for me to march up to glare at him.

"That's LIEUTENANT to you, soldier!" I shouted in his face. "ATTENTION! Or so help you, I will have you thrown in the brig for a fucking DECADE!"

He froze. I doubted he had any clue that I was capable to asserting myself like this. To be honest, I didn't tend to, except in emergency situations and then never at this volume. All medics have training to be firm, assertive and professional, though shouting was usually considered a no-no. But there wasn't a single professional in this room except me. My mind treacherously slid back to the Blackadder episode with the Duke of Wellington where he had claimed the basis of his military success was shouting. Shout, shout and shout some more! And in this bear-pit, it actually seemed the only way to get through to this bunch of dysfunctional lunatics. I glared at Eret, folded my arms and watched the big man move warily to attention.

"Anyone else wants to piss me off?" I sneered. The room fell silent. I grabbed a chair, stalked up onto the stage and sat pointedly by Hiccup, who glanced up at me warily. "Resume your seat, soldier. Now-Sergeant...do you have the smallest clue of how to conduct a proper debriefing after a training exercise?"

Snotlout stared at me and I could see his mind considering about four different and untruthful possibilities. But in the end, he managed 'No, Ma'am." I managed not to smirk but it was a beautiful moment.
"Right," I said and stared at the Riders. I had effectively usurped Snotlout's command but quite frankly, I knew it was necessary. I would go to the General after this meeting and explain what I had done and then ask what he wanted me to do. Because Hiccup was clearly the only person fit to lead the Riders and he needed the authority to do it. And only Stoick could supply that.

"Sergeant-please concisely describe the plan for the exercise and then we can review what actually happened, who did what and what lessons we can learn from this experience." I stared at him as he blinked at me, sweating. I guessed the plan was about a million miles from what he actually did. I saw Hiccup glance at me curiously from the corner of his eye and give a slight shake of the head. He didn't realise that I would do my damnedest to make sure he understood it wasn't his fault: because they had been waiting, the ambush set up before we even started the exercise. And they had picked their dragon long before Hiccup ever swung into the saddle. I stared at Snotlout again and narrowed my eyes.

"Proceed!"

oOo

Heather tested her bonds but they were firm. She let out a string of curses and had a frenzy of struggling but to no avail. Finally, she slumped in the chair she was bound to, breathing hard.

She was in a small, blank room. The walls were painted white and the floor was grey concrete. There was one door, one fluorescent strip light and no windows. It wasn't an encouraging sight. And there was no sign of her dragon.

"Don't worry, baby sister," Dagur assured her as he walked through the door and came slowly towards her. "You'll be free soon enough." She glanced up, anxious. She loved him but she knew he was dangerous.

"Where's Windshear?" she asked and he gave little giggle.

"Deathwing is making her feel sooooo welcome," he assured her, nuzzling against her neck and sniffing her hair. She tried to pull away.

"Dagur…." she warned him. "If you've harmed my dragon…." He drew away, as if scalded.

"I wouldn't hurt her," he pouted. "Though Al might. He's got a lot less patience than me, sis. And he wants your Razorwhip for his portfolio of hireable dragons." Heather's grey eyes stared up into his pale green ones.

"You know I won't help you, right?" she reminded him. He sighed.

"Sister, sister-you have no idea how sad that makes me!" he said, abruptly grabbing her hair and wrenching her head back. "Hey, Al-you were right! She did want to do it the hard way!" And the bulky shape of Alvin walked in, Vorg at his heels. He gave a nasty grin.

"Eather-yer 'ave no idea 'ow much yer brother 'as missed yer!" he sighed. "'e really wanted yer to join 'im of yer own free will but I see yer going her need a bit more persuading."

"Is this what you said to Hiccup?" she snapped. "It didn't work for him and it won't work for me!" Alvin smiled.

"Ah, 'iccup," he sighed. "'ow is 'e? It was such a shame 'e left before we 'ad a chance ter finish our business!" Heather stared at him.
"Let me go!" she insisted. Alvin suddenly lunged close to her, inspecting her face from a few inches.

"No," he breathed. "I want yer dragon and I want you! You may 'ave the dragons, girl, but we will steal them from yer, one by one, and we will steal you all to drive them for us. And that old fool Stoick won't be able ter do one single thing about it. Because yer going her 'elp me, girlie."

"Never!" she spat. Vorg approached her and lifted a syringe, plunging it into her exposed neck, Dagur gave a proud smile as the girl gasped and then the three men stepped back. She closed her eyes and blinked. She suddenly felt very hot and her limbs seemed to weigh a ton each. The entire room was swimming and she was trying to recall why she was here, why her legs were bound and her brother was grinning at her madly.

She blinked an her eyes darkened a shade, her pupils dilating and she lifted her head. "Brother?" she murmured.

"Yes, dear sister?" he said, leaning close.

"Get me out of here," she breathed. "And then we can have some fun. Let's steal some dragons!"

Chapter End Notes

Reference: Blackadder the Third episode 6 'Duel and Duality' written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton (copyright BBC). Classic British Comedy.
Deadly Date

As soon as the debriefing ended, I went straight to the General's office. I didn't even stop to chat to Hiccup, though I did pat him on the arm as I got up and stalked out. I caught a glimpse of his face as I left and I felt bad for leaving him with the Riders but I knew I needed to see Stoick immediately. I confidently marched to his office and rapped on the door.

I was invited in and I saluted smartly. Once he had invited me to stand at ease, I paused and waited to be invited to speak.

"Lieutenant, I believe you want to tell me something?" he suggested. Did he know? I gave a little smile.

"Yes, sir," I admitted. "I took control of the debriefing today because, quite frankly, there wasn't anyone else for to lead it who was allowed to do so." He frowned.

"I thought Snotlout…" he began.

"…is an utter imbecile," I informed him sternly. "He is completely unable to coordinate anything or run a meeting. The whole thing was a shambles. It had descended into recriminations and a pack mentality against your son." He frowned. "I think the last straw was Corporal Eret calling me 'sweet cheeks' and suggesting I keep out of men's business. So I exercised my rank and told the lot of them to sit down and shut up."

He gave a small smile. "Good," he murmured. "Go on."

"I ran the debriefing, made notes and will have a report on your desk by tomorrow morning," I reported shortly. "I suspect the other riders will be knocking your door down to complain but frankly, sir, I would kick all their asses. I don't want to remove their individuality but they need to respect the chain of command." Stoick stared at me and nodded.

"Anything else?" he asked, making a note of his blotter.

"Permission to speak freely," I said. He nodded. "Sir-the only person who is qualified to lead the Riders is Hiccup. He is an exceptional leader, a superb rider and astonishingly patient."

"I would hope you remain in command," Stoick said. I sighed.

"Hiccup should be in command, sir," I insisted. "I am happy to help with military matters-since I have that background. He doesn't-but he should be in charge."

"He's not military," Stoick said coldly.

"No, he isn't, sir," I replied. "But he is part of BERK. By the way, is he even on the payroll?" He blinked: it really wasn't anything he had considered.

"He gets board and…"

"Sir!" I snapped. "He works his ass off! He's worked in IT, he trains and rides a dragon, he translates ancient Norse, he gets dragged along on exercises. He is a full member of BERK, no matter that his route of entry was non-standard. He should be treated as such. And in that case, he should have a rank!"
"He's not trained army!" Stoick growled. "He can't…"

"With all due respect, sir, you really don't know what he can or can't do!" I retort. "You were absent most of his childhood. He has suffered emotional and physical abuse from bullies and his so-called colleagues here and neglect from you. I presume you knew he was once picked up by family services?" Stoick nodded with a scowl.

"I was on an important mission, had to leave at almost no notice and I…returned to find him in a home," he admitted. My face locked in a scowl. Whatever had actually happened to him there had been so bad he had self-harmed. "When I returned, I had command return him to me and expunge the record." Friends in high places, I thought uncharitably, grinding my teeth. As long as you do what the mission required, your poor son could go to Hell! And effectively did.

"But my point, sir, is that he has been neglected and harmed by that neglect but despite that, he had become an invaluable member of this unit," I pointed out. "Despite the fact he's been banned from flying and seeing his dragon, he was brought along on the exercise and saved the whole thing from falling apart. He saved your life, sir. He was the only one in command. He managed to talk down his dragon which was, quite frankly, the most amazing thing I have ever seen!"

"He is not in the army," Stoick growled.

"Sir, that doesn't matter," I told him. "From what I understand, BERK is not just army. Command simply doesn't work where the commanding officer carries a lower rank than the rest of the team. He needs an acting-rank commensurate with that."

"Why does it matter?" Stoick asked me. I paused and then gave a slight smile.

"Because, sir, Hiccup desp..." I said clearly. "He is smart, brave, funny, patient, kind, supportive and generous. He chronically lacks self-confidence and takes far too much responsibility upon himself for his actual involvement. He is a true leader and when needed, he is decisive and fearless. But he needs to feel valued and supported-and only you can grant him the rank he needs to protect and enable him to command the unit." My tone was determined.

"Why are you fighting for him?" Stoick asked me flatly.

"Because he's worth fighting for," I told him shortly. "He's kind and brave. He saved my life. He made me feel welcomed and valued, even when he wasn't. He's funny and cute and shy and dorkish and yet I know if I am in trouble he will come through! So I want him to have what he needs to do his job. BERK isn't the army, sir and I believe that any military rank will count. Such as…Commander?"

"A naval rank?"

"Or Wing Commander?" I suggested. "This unit is far more like an air force than an army unit. And either rank outranks me and the rest of those idiots!" His brows dipped.

"You don't want the command?" he asked me. I laughed.

"I'm medical, sir-assuming I pass my exams," I reminded him. "And I'm not even a proper rider. There is no way on Earth I could lead this unit: I have no credibility, even if I have the only working knowledge of military protocol and commissioned rank in the unit! No, sir: Hiccup needs to be your commander. Give him the rank, revoke his suspension and flight ban and let the poor guy get on with being what he's best at!" Stoick sat back in his chair and steepled his hands.

"Anything else?" he asked in an amused voice. I nodded.
"One thing," I said quietly and stared hard into his eyes. "Have you tagged the other dragons?" He frowned. "I know you put four trackers in Toothless but, knowing that Alvin is trying to steal them, why in God's name didn't you tag the others?"

He stared at me in shock. I rolled my eyes.

"Please tell me you did at least consider tagging them?" I asked. "I mean, how else will you find out where Heather is? Or any of the others?" I paused. "But I would advise you to tag them secretly so the other Riders don't know. I agree with Hiccup: there is at least one person here who isn't working for BERK and we don't want him or her knowing we could track their stolen dragon or have them trying to remove the tracking implant." Stoick made another note on his blotter: he had been almost constantly writing since I started my interview.

"Is that everything?" he asked in an amused voice. I nodded.

"Yes, sir!" I said and smiled, then forced my face to look neutral.

"Hmm, I think I may have got off lightly," the General said. "And Lieutenant-no matter the result of your exams, I can tell you now you will be staying in Berk as one of Gothi's team! I suspect I may need to sack Gobber and make you operations officer if you continue at this rate! What do you think?" And I realised he was talking to someone behind me. I turned-to see Hiccup standing quietly just inside the door, leaning on his crutches with a slight smile on his lips. I felt my heart drop to my boots and wondered exactly how much he had heard of my very direct assessment of his qualities. Dammit! I felt myself blushing.

"Definitely feisty," he commented with the slightest smile and I had to try not to smile myself. "I wouldn't argue with her, Dad. Especially after she dismantled Eret for patronising her." Stoick took a deep breath.

"I agree with her assessment of the unit," he said heavily. "Your flight suspension is removed, you can see Toothless whenever you wish and for the Gods sake, get her trained ASAP! I think you need her as second-in-command and I don't want to have to have another of these discussions!" Hiccup blinked in shock and his green eyes shone with emotion. He nodded.

"Thank you, sir," he murmured.

"Report to Gobber, son," Stoick commanded him sharply. "He needs to reinstate your access and privileges-Commander!" He blinked.

"What the…?" he gaped. Now it was my chance to smile at his confusion and embarrassment.

"Dismissed!" Stoick said and pressed his hand to his head as I turned to the door and marched out, followed by Hiccup. I stalked away, still feeling really embarrassed and I heard him speeding after me, the clunk of his crutches loud in the metal corridor.

"Hold up!" he panted as I finally relented and stopped to allow him to catch up. He still looked dreadful-gaunt, deep shadows under his eyes and battered but his eyes were sparkling and he was grinning. "Astrid-thank you," he said in a low voice. "I-I can never show you how much this means to me…" I remembered his voice and face when he was reunited with his dragon and I nodded.

"Actually I can guess," I told him and then I grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him towards me, leaning up to kiss him. He stiffened for a second, then leaned into the kiss, a hand rising to gently cup my cheek as he returned my kiss with interest. Finally, he pulled away, a goofy smile
tilting his face, his eyes luminous as he stared softly into my face. "And that'll do, Dragon Boy!" I told him with a smile.

oOo

I checked in at the infirmary, having missed lunch entirely, to find that Gothi had decided that I had done more than enough work and deserved an afternoon off. I smiled and didn't argue: my head was buzzing and I was tired: I needed a break. So I hit the gym, went for a run on the track and visited Stormfly in the Vet pens with one of the technicians as a chaperone because I was still inexperienced in handling her. The dragon had been ecstatic to see me and I had felt guilty about not visiting her the previous day so I spent ages fussing and stroking her until she was a purring drooling mess. When I left her, she was totally chilled and happy so I reckoned it was time well spent. And I felt a whole load better myself.

I slowly went back to my room, packed away my revision folders and tidied everything up before hitting the shower and soothing away the kinks of the day. Then I sighed as the hot water still streamed over me: I hadn't wanted to shout at the Riders but someone had to do it and I guessed I was volunteered. It wouldn't do anything for my almost non-existent social life but I pulled myself up: why would I want to spend time with those mutton heads anyway? I must be getting desperate! I scrubbed my face again and finally stepped out the shower. It was weird not to have revision to do. So I dressed, pampered myself and eventually, I rebraided my hair. I looked around my little room and groaned: I couldn't stay here so I headed to the Mess to get some coffee.

I grabbed a large mug, found a corner table and opened my e-reader to continue my current trashy novel—my guilty pleasure when not revising, working or on exercises. I took a sip and flipped the page up, then started to read.

I had skimmed a chapter when I heard the clunk of something metal hitting the leg of the table and I looked up. Hiccup parked his crutches, slumped into the seat opposite me and managed to land the tray on the table without spilling the cups of coffee he had brought. He purposefully put the fresh coffee in front of me and then plonked down a chocolate muffin. He grinned as he propped the tray by the table and sipped his coffee. "All yours, Milady," he said cheerfully. I thanked him with a grin and clicked off my reader.

"Thank you, Dragon Boy!" I replied and broke a piece off the muffin. I paused. "Or is that Commander Dragon Boy?" Chocolate exploded in my mouth and I stared at the muffin: it was amazing. "You gotta have a piece of this!" I invited him. His green eyes twinkled and he broke the tiniest piece off the corner then munched it solemnly.

"Yeah—chocolate," he sighed happily. "I think Commander Dragon Boy would be excessive?" There was a twinkle in his eyes and I found myself grinning back.

"Be more difficult to get on a cap," I murmured.

"Told you-T shirts are better!" he smirked. I gave him a small scowl and took another bite of the muffin. "So…have—have you got anything planned for this evening?" My eyes flicked up to inspect him. He was blushing slightly and I could tell he was nervous. I sipped my coffee.

"Um, tragically no," I sighed. I had an appointment with my trashy novel and a cup of cocoa. I wondered if I could get satellite TV here. He fidgeted and fiddled with his hands and then looked up into my face.

"Um…I was going to see Toothless," he said in an embarrassed voice. "I—I wondered if you wanted to come? And—and then maybe we could…a movie?" I stared at him. He was definitely blushing
now and his idea of a date was to go and see his dragon? I broke the remains of my muffin into two and handed half to him then nodded.

"You know, that's the best offer I've had for ages," I told him, polishing my half off. He paused and then his face was lit by a smile, his eyes sparkling. I guessed he had prepared himself to be laughed at and rejected: his lack of confidence was still cute but also just a little heart wrenching. "Can I finish this fabulous coffee first?" He nodded eagerly and took a shaky sip of his own coffee and then I realised how anxious he had been about asking me...effectively...on a date.

So we headed out to see Toothless, with Hiccup talking all the way about his Night Fury friend. The dragon had been moved again to prevent him from seeing Toothless and we were now heading for the blandly named 'Pen One'. Except the dratted thing was a mile away along a long tunnel that ran a level above the running track I used daily. I was wandering along easily but Hiccup was working hard, his crutches clicking loudly in the corridor as he winced whenever he tried to put any weight on his left leg. He paused and caught his breath: it was a long journey and I wonder how he would cope on the way back.

"Isn't there a shortcut or transit system?" I asked as I watched him wipe the sweat from his forehead then push on again. He shook his head as he swung along.

"Not really designed as accessible," he admitted with a sigh. "I doubt they were imagining anyone would be stupid enough to lose a leg!" I swatted him across the shoulder.

"Stop that!" I scolded him. "Any institution involving large animals and amateurs looking after them should be prepared for injuries. And you were attacked! You were hardly trying to get your leg bitten off!" He stopped and squinted at me.

"Why do you keep trying to make me feel better and tell me it's not my fault!" he asked suspiciously. I stared at him and sighed.

"Because it isn't!" I replied. "And because I like you and I absolutely hate seeing you torturing yourself when you aren't to blame!" He stared at me in shock, his green eyes wide as he halted and stared.

"You...like me?" I rolled my eyes.

"Cute, clever, dorkish...but really dense sometimes!" I sighed. "I thought the kiss may have been a clue." I gestured. "Let's go and see your dragon. By the way, have you ever been out with a girl?" He put his head down and accelerated down the corridor, not answering. I frowned and had to run to catch up with him with a horrible sinking feeling in my stomach. He looked really hurt and I suddenly felt terribly guilty. "Hey!" I called. "Hiccup! I'm sorry! I didn't mean..." And he stopped, breathing hard. He stared solidly at the floor.

"Almost, though I'm pretty sure that it was actually a set up because she never turned up but everybody seemed to know the next day and there were pictures which everybody saw of me being stood up and they were everywhere and absolutely everybody made sure I knew they had seen them so, yeah...not really but almost..." he said without taking a breath, his cheeks scorching with embarrassment. I slipped my arm through his and nudged him.

"Hiccup," I said sternly, "you're out with one now. And she wants her date to stop beating himself up and show her his dragon!" I paused. "And no, that is NOT a double entendre." He looked up and there was a slight lift to the corners of his mouth.

"Sure?" he asked me in a soft voice, his cheeks still warm. "Because...um...I can really..."
"Hiccup, do you want to lose your other leg?" I asked him with a mock-growl.

"I think I can hear Toothless calling…" he said quickly and took off again, with me at his side. Finally, we reached the huge brushed steel door and I looked up at it.

"Wow—what's in there? A Brontosaurus?" I suggested and he smirked, then leaned across and pressed his lightly strapped left hand onto the reader. There was a pause, then the door cracked and we entered.

I gaped. The space was huge, easily a quarter of a mile deep, almost as wide and two hundred feet high. There were natural rocky shelves one the cliff walls, a shallow lake to one side and rocks strewn across the ground. There was moss covering most of the floor and light filtered in through wide fluorspar sheets in the roof while powerful LEDs supplemented the waxy light. Hiccup took a couple of steps forward then put his hands to his mouth and gave an extraordinary bellowing roar! I blinked as he stared across the space…and then a reply echoed back. I inspected him in shock.

"Night Fury roar," he said with some pride. "Carries a lot further than a shout." And he smiled as the familiar black shape came bounding towards him, warbling in excitement and accelerating at the sight of his rider. Hiccup shambled forward and hugged the dragon fiercely and I smiled at the joy in his face. But then he turned to me and beckoned me over, leading his dragon towards me and talking softly. "Here we are, bud—this is Astrid." He looked up and gave a small smile. "Astrid—this is Toothless, my best friend." The dragon crooned, his big acid-green eyes with wide pupils and gummy smile making him look seriously cute. Just like his rider. I inched forward and Hiccup firmly took my wrist, then pulled it down to Toothless's nose, offering my scent to the dragon. He sniffed and I held my breath—and then I felt his nose press firmly against my hand. I found myself smiling as I heard Hiccup murmur "Attaboy!"

"Hi, Toothless," I said cheerfully, staring into the big, appealing eyes. "Wow—it's great to meet you properly at last." The dragon gave a warm little rumble and he nuzzled against my hand. I stroked him gently, seeing pride in Hiccup's eyes and I wondered if this was like meeting your boyfriend's best friend and getting on. "He's so cute," I commented, "not unlike his Rider!" Hiccup blushed and dropped his eyes: he really was astonishingly shy and I was determined to cure him of that. "So are you going to show me how you fly?"

He grinned. "Thought you'd never ask," he said and patted the dragon. "Shall we?" And he swung into the saddle, then clipped his prosthetic into the control pedal. He beckoned me over: I scooted up and threw my leg over the dragon to sit close behind him. "Put your arms around me," he invited me. I wrapped them around his lean shape and felt him tense in mild embarrassment. Then I leaned closer, feeling the warmth of his body and the play of his muscles—he was a lithe and wiry rather than muscle-bound like that mutton-headed Snotlout.

"You ready?" he asked me in an amused voice.

"Er…as I'll ever be," I said and was annoyed that my voice was wavering wildly. He leaned forward and I heard the rustle as the tail opened.

"Gently, bud—we need her to like us," he murmured as I felt the dragon tense under us and suddenly leap up into the air. I screamed and my arms tightened fiercely around him. He leaned forward and I clamped to him, burying my face in his back. And then I realised that we were hovering about twenty feet off the ground, the rhythmic pumping of the Night Fury's huge wings holding us motionless in the still air.

"It's okay, Astrid," he soothed me. "I know your last flight was unplanned and very scary but trust me, it will be okay. I won't let anything happen to you!" I swallowed.
"I trust you," I gulped and lifted my head slightly. This was what I had signed up for and I was still terrified being out of control. But Hiccup was in charge: confident, calm and controlled. He pulled up on the saddle and we rose steadily, then sculled steadily around, beginning a lazy spiral up. I peeked over my shoulder and saw the ground dropping away. I could feel Hiccup lean in every turn, his motions smooth and effortless as if he were one with the dragon. Soon, we were close to the roof, hovering again and viewing the huge expanse of the cavern.

"How is it so far?" he asked me. I leaned against him, enjoying the feel of his warm, toned back.

"Less scary than last time, thanks," I called and he gave a little chuckle.

"Hold on tight," he said and suddenly, we were dropping, I screamed as we flipped then swooped low over the little lake, a strange whine sounding as the dragon's wings sliced through the air. Hiccup pulled us up hard and we climbed ferociously then topped out and dived again. I screamed and grabbed him tighter. I could feel him laughing and swore all sorts of painful retribution against him as we skimmed the lake then spiralled rapidly up again.

"HICCUP!" I screamed in his ear and he took us down into a gentler swoop them circled the cavern and gently soared back up again. "VERY scary now!"

"Alright, Milady," he said as we levelled out and he peered back at me. His eyes were sparkling with joy and he looked exhilarated. The wind was ruffling his auburn hair in all sorts of directions as he smiled. "Sorry," he whispered.

"This must be the daredevil part!" I shouted at him. He nodded with a shrug.

"Guilty as charged," he shot back but there was no contrition in his tone: it was something he was proud of.

"Just warn me next time," I shouted at him.

"I just wanted you to get a feel of what you can be doing on Stormfly once you are used to flying her," he replied, his tone calm.

"I intend to be the slowest dragon rider in history!" I shouted back. "Slow lane all the way!"

"Not on a Nadder!" Hiccup called to him. "She's a fast dragon. Leave the slow lane to Meatlug and Fishlegs!"

"While, you, Dragon Boy, are the fastest in the sky?" I teased him.

"So far-but I'll wait to see what you can do!" he called back.

I blinked and felt something sharp bite my arm. I glanced down and frowned. There was a flash of red. My head was suddenly spinning.

"Hic…" I began as my vision blanked and felt myself fall from the dragon.
You've been waiting for this for years

Hiccup snapped his head round as he felt her death grip around his middle slacken and her body slide suddenly to the left.

"ASTRID!" he screamed as she slithered off the dragon. Instinct took over and he grabbed at her-unfortunately with his broken left hand. He bit back on a groan of pain as he snared her wrist in a less than perfect grip and felt the sharp pain in his shoulder as her body swung free over the yawning, lethal drop. "Toothless!" The dragon instantly flipped to the right, jolting Astrid up and allowing her body to slam into Hiccup. The boy wrapped his arm ferociously around her as they banked down abruptly. He hugged her tight as the dragon corrected and they swooped down, before pulling up and landing hard.

Hiccup was breathing hard as he wrenched his metal leg painfully from the control pedal and stared in horror into Astrid's slack features. She was pale and limp and he hesitantly lifted a hand and pressed a finger into her neck. After a horrifically-long second, he felt the swell of her pulse and he breathed a tiny smidgeon easier: she was alive. But she was limp and unconscious and he hugged her to his body, staring into her face.

"Astrid?" he murmured. "Astrid, please wake up!" But she was unresponsive. He stroked her face tenderly, his long and sensitive fingers relishing the feel of her smooth skin, her silky hair. "Please," he breathed. But she was still. Then he looked up and saw a flash of red: there was something in her arm. He picked it up: it was a dart, like the one they had removed from Stormfly. His eyes hardened and then he froze.

They were a very long way from the main part of the base and there was no rapid transport back to the main part of the complex. He was on crutches and could barely make the journey himself: he couldn't carry her. And she needed help now. He took a shuddering breath: there was only one option. He clipped his prosthesis back into the tail assembly and shifted Astrid snugly against his body, cradling her head against his chest and feeling her hair brush his neck.

"I need your help, bud," he said quietly. "We're both gonna get in so much trouble for this but we have to do this. I'm so sorry…but we have to get Astrid to the infirmary." The dragon crooned and craned his neck to inspect his rider with one luminous eye. He could hear the desperation in Hiccup's quiet voice and feel the tension twanging through his rider's frame. Then they walked to the steel door and Toothless warbled: he had never left the Pens except under guard. Hiccup punched in his code and the doors cracked open—and then they walked out.

He knew that alarms would have gone off the moment a dragon was out of containment without proper authorisation. Especially as Toothless was tagged four ways from Sunday. So he directed the dragon to the long corridor heading for the main part of the base. "Now, bud-run! We need to get help!" And the dragon responded, his powerful and agile shape accelerating to a loping gallop as they sped down the corridor. Hiccup's hand locked on the saddle as they sped along but he kept worriedly checking Astrid, feeling her shallow breathing and nuzzling against her in a confusion of emotions. His grip was sure and strong as he directed the dragon onward. He could feel his anxiety rising and he knew what would happen when he got back to the base. He glanced at her: she was worth it.

They sped through the door to the main containment area and Hiccup could see the red alarms flashing now. They were alert to his transgression and he had little time. He galloped Toothless up the nearest stairwell with astonishing agility to the first level where the infirmary was sited and he cantered the dragon along the main corridor, to the astonishment and shock of everyone they
encountered. There were shouts and gapes of shock and a flurry of people reaching for their wrist-coms, calling for security.

"Nearly there, bud," he murmured, then thumbed his own wrist-com. "Hiccup to Gothi. I've got a casualty-Astrid. I think she's been shot with one of the darts they used on Stormfly. She's unconscious and...gods, I don't know if she's okay! Please...you have to help her!"

Toothless skidded round the corner to the infirmary. There were shouts now and the sounds of running feet. They were almost out of time—but the infirmary was just ahead and the shapes of Gothi and Ragnar were at the door, waiting with two nurses and an auxiliary. The dragon skidded to a halt and the boy swung his leg over, wrenching his prosthetic free with a groan of pain. He handed the limp body to Ragnar, his hand lingering on her hair for a second longer.

"We were in Pen One, flying," he said breathlessly. "Suddenly she went limp. I saw this in her arm..." And he handed over the dart. "Please, look after her. I..." Gothi nodded and smiled, then motioned Ragnar to carry her into the infirmary. Hiccup turned to follow but the click of firing bolts being cocked stopped him. He slowly raised his arms and turned unsteadily to face the security squad who were ranged with their weapons all trained on the young rider, with him in centre of their cross-hairs. Spitelout was grinning insanely.

"I knew you'd fuck up soon enough!" he announced triumphantly.

"Glad to make your day," Hiccup said sarcastically.

"You know it is absolutely forbidden to bring a dragon out of containment!" Spitelout snarled. "You've put everyone at risk!"

"Less than you think," Hiccup said evenly, eyeing the security men. Every eye was unfriendly, the fingers tightening around the triggers. He took a quick breath and steeled himself. "You've been waiting years for this. So-go on!" Spitelout nodded and the security detail all took aim—then fired. Hiccup shuddered with each impact before his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the floor by his dragon.

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"So which target should we choose?" The voice was dark and cruel, the huge silhouette rotating to inspect the screen that occupied a whole wall of his ultra-modern office. Coal-dark eyes glittered as he scanned a list if possible targets, with likely casualty and fatality numbers listed. Anything with fewer than a hundred dead was rejected out of hand. "We know the Riders are based in Scotland so a target in Scotland or northern England will be most appropriate.

The map altered and a smattering of red dots scattered over the northern half of Britain.

"We need something that will attract the dragons in favour of conventional forces, something too dangerous for mere humans." The second voice was calculating and cool. "Maybe something inflammable?" The image changed.

"The Oil Terminal? That would be nicely explosive. And it would make a statement."

The huge shape nodded his head, dreadlocks swinging. "Proceed. We need them engaged before we can acquire them. The clock is ticking."

oOo

There were worse things than Gobber to see first on waking up but not as many as you would think.
Hiccup cracked his eyes open a sliver and gave an enormous groan, flinging his arm across his face to block out the painful light. His head was pounding, his vision was blurred and he was feeling sick. So all in all, it had gone better than expected.

"Ye couldnae wait one measly day before gettin' thrown in the brig, laddie?"

"That's Commander laddie to you, Gobber," Hiccup groaned. "No. I had no other options."

"How 'bout calling for help?"

"We were in Pen One and Astrid was out," he said wearily. "Coms are unreliable there and I know how long it takes any help to get there. I couldn't carry her with my leg. So I got Toothless to do it for me." He gave a low moan. "I knew what I was facing but I had to get her to medical help immediately. He was the quickest option. Sorry." He sighed. "Is Toothless okay?"

"Coming round in Pen Eleven," Gobber report.

"The one he really hates," Hiccup groaned. "Boy, I won't hear the last of that." He groaned as he moved and raised a hand to his chest. He felt like he had been kicked in the ribs. "Ow."

"Spitelout darted yer seven times," Gobber smirked. "Ye should be out 'til next week-but yer father wanted ye awake ter answer ter him. So we used the antidote. Ye'll feel pretty rough fer a few days though." Hiccup nodded, feeling very sick, his head spinning. Then he suddenly sat up.

"How is Astrid?" he asked urgently.

"Still unconscious," Gobber reported and Hiccup's face filled with panic.

"But-but I thought that she would be okay by now…" he murmured. He stared up at Gobber pleadingly. "Can you get me to see her?" There was a long pause.

"Spitelout wants you confined here for the duration," Gobber revealed.

"I gotta see her, Gobber," Hiccup pleaded. "She was only there because she was with me! I took her to see Toothless-we were flying…and then she just went limp and fell. We caught her but…she was out. It looked like another of those darts they used on Stormfly. She should be f-fine…"

"Ye broke one o' the most basic rules o' the Base, laddie!" Gobber scolded him.

"To save her. I did it for her!" he begged. "You can put as many chains on me as you want, but please let me see her!" The Colonel looked embarrassed and shrugged.

"Only one person can allow ye outta this cage, boy," he admitted as the door slammed open.

"HICCUP!" Stoick roared.

"Oh gods," Hiccup murmured, a hand pressed hard against his aching head. "Hey, Dad-sir…whatever…" He pressed his eyes closed as his father stomped closer.

"WHAT THE HEL WERE YOU THINKING?" Stoick shouted. Hiccup winced.

"A little less volume, please," he murmured.

"WHAT WAS THAT?" Stoick yelled.

"Glad to see you too, Dad," Hiccup sighed. "How's your day?"
'IT WAS FINE UNTIL MY IDIOT OF A SON GOT HIMSELF THROWN INTO JAIL FOR TAKING A DRAGON OUT OF CONTAINMENT!' Hiccup winced again: he reckoned they could have probably heard that in Edinburgh.

"Sorry, Dad-though in my defence it was a medical emergency," he protested quietly. "Astrid was hit by one of those darts and nearly fell. She looks really sick and I was all the way over in Pen One with Toothless. It was the quickest way to get her to help." He looked up at the looming, scowling shape. "I knew what I was doing—but I knew Toothless was safe." Stoick stared at the ashen shape before him: Hiccup looked almost green around the eyes with nausea.

"Aye, I reckon you did at that," the General said more gently. "BUT..." His voice hardened. "RULES ARE THERE TO BE OBEYED!"

"I understand—even when they are stupid..." Hiccup grumbled. "Yeah, I know you can't have dragons wandering around the base—especially with the twins—but Toothless is far smarter and more obedient than any of the others and he is safe when he's with me. But I made the choice, Dad. Astrid was with me and she was hurt: I had to get her to help as soon as possible—no matter the cost."

Stoick turned away and paced the room, his brows dipped in a scowl. He muttered a couple of words. Hiccup frowned and glanced at Gobber. The Colonel grinned madly and scratched his chin.

"I think he said 'that's my boy', laddie," he announced. Stoick scowled at him then turned back to his son.

"I can't let this pass," he said grimly. "You understand, Hiccup? Or those idiot Thorstons will have Barf'n'Belch out blowing up half of BERK." Hiccup groaned and collapsed back onto his bunk, pressing his hands over his eyes.

"What now?" he sighed.

"You are confined to base for a week. You lose flight privileges for three days. You will do all of the staff evaluations for the Riders—believe me, that will be no picnic. And you will remain tagged," Stoick decided. He glanced at Gobber. "He can go to the infirmary but he will be shackled so he can't run out or fly off. And he needs to ask permission from a commissioned officer to visit his Dragon and must be accompanied by said officer. See to it." Then he stomped out. Gobber rapped on the door and an MP entered.

"The prisoner is being released—in shackles—to be taken to the infirmary," he commanded and the security officer wordlessly opened the door, grabbed Hiccup's arm and hauled the boy to his feet. Hiccup was shoved from the cell and shackles clamped round his normal foot and clipped into the prosthesis. Hiccup sighed as he was shoved out of the brig and thrust down the corridor. His crutches were still in Pen One and his leg was agonising as he shambled unsteadily along. The MP was very unsympathetic and shoved him forward whenever he felt Hiccup was slowing.

"Hey—I'm doing the best I can," Hiccup protested gently. The MP growled: he was a friend of Eret's and disliked Hiccup as a matter of principle—even if he didn't hold the rider responsible for the loss of Eret's girlfriend. The man glared at him.

"And that's pretty inadequate," the MP snapped. Hiccup stiffened and looked at him.

"No one asked your opinion, soldier," he suggested as the man shoved him on and he stumbled and tripped, landing hard on his knees. He hissed at the impact on his painful left leg.
"Up!" the MP snapped and grabbed Hiccup's shoulder, dragging him to his feet and thrusting him forward. Hiccup felt his hands clench in anger but forced himself to walk forward. He was feeling the all-too familiar feeling in his stomach of being vulnerable and at the mercy of someone who really would like to see him hurt. He limped awkwardly on until they reached the elevator and then he ground to a halt. Eret was waiting, a cold grin on his face. Hiccup stared up at him and rolled his eyes.

"Really?" he sighed as the MP bundled him into the capsule and Eret followed, closing the door and stabbing the button. But almost immediately, he paused the car and slammed Hiccup back against the steel wall.

"We were interrupted last time but your girlfriend isn't here to protect you, Hiccup!" Eret sneered and closed his hand around the younger man's neck. "Your incompetence caused Heather's loss!"

"And it was nothing to do with Dagur, Savage and Alvin?" Hiccup shot back sarcastically. "My mistake—it's always my fault, isn't it?" Eret punched him in the stomach and he gasped, doubling up.

Eret had no qualms in slamming him back against the wall.

"You could just do us a favour and leave," the larger Rider sneered. Hiccup swallowed anxiously.

"Or you could pretend you're a soldier and stop assaulting a senior officer," he said shortly. Eret punched him again. "Gods! What is it with this accursed place?" he swore in pain. "Let me go! There are bigger problems than your precious girlfriend." The punch that floored him for that shot was probably deserved and Hiccup bit his lip against a groan.

"I should kill you for that!"

"Get in line!" Hiccup hissed. "Dagur is after me. Most of the damned staff in this place are too. Security is a joke. Military protocol is a joke. Are you sure you're actually a soldier?" Eret kicked him hard and he winced.

"Maybe we should offer a swap," he snarled. "I wonder what Dagur will do with you when he gets you." Hiccup stiffened, horrific images crawling across his memory.

"You don't wanna know," he breathed. "Have you been talking with Ozzie?"

"Has the geek finally seen you for what you are? Daddy's precious little boy?" Eret sneered and Hiccup stared at the floor, anger and hurt warring in his heart. He had never been his father's favourite even though he was his father's only child.

"Whoever darted Stormfly has shot Astrid," he said roughly. "Maybe you should look out for whoever is instead of wasting your time here." Eret kicked him again and he groaned. "Restart the elevator, Eret. That's an order!" The big Rider kicked him again and then stabbed the button as the MP jerked Hiccup to his feet. He winced and rested a hand against his bruised middle. "Any chance of ensuring humane treatment of prisoners?" Hiccup asked him sarcastically. The man slammed him back against the wall as the doors opened and Eret swung away casually. Hiccup was roughly shoved out and he stumbled then righted himself before limping painfully towards the doors.

Gothi greeted him with a smile as he arrived and he shambled forward, his face worried. "How is she?" he asked. Goth raised a gnarled finger and gave a little smile.

"See for yourself. She is stable but not yet awake." Her electronic voice was eerie which was why she didn't usually use it but Hiccup looked anxious enough to risk the creepy monotone. He limped
badly in the direction indicated, his shackles clicking as he entered a small room and found Astrid, lying silently on a bed, dressed in a hospital gown, the sheets pulled up to her waist, her sun bright golden hair still in its braid. An oxygen mask covered her lower face and an I/V was in her hand. A host of monitors beeped and recorded every aspect of her wellbeing. Hiccup swallowed, expecting her to open her stunning sea-blue eyes and smirk at him. Her chest rose and fell but otherwise, she was still.

Quietly, he dragged a chair closer and shifted to find a comfortable position. His leg was agonising and his gut was sore and bruised. He silently cursed Eret, Dagur, Ozzie, Savage, Spitelout and every one of the Riders who wouldn't believe or support him when he knew that security was compromised. Who had ultimately allowed this to happen to Astrid. Then he gently took Astrid's hand: it was warm which reassured him and he tangled his fingers with hers, gently lifting her hand to his lips.

"I'm here, Astrid," he murmured gently. "I'm not going anywhere."

I became aware of beeping and the first thought I had was "Shit! I've dropped asleep on duty!"

Then I became aware that I was lying on my back which was unusual because every time I have fallen asleep, I've been slumped over a desk, with my face on a set of notes and an embarrassing pool of drool by my mouth.

My hand felt sore, a persistent ache nagging in the back of my left hand.

Someone was holding my other hand, a warm hand with fingers laced loosely through my own. I rocked my head to that side and opened my eyes a crack, to see a messy mass of dark auburn hair, resting by my arm.

I glanced up and saw the monitors above me. The beeping was the sound of my heart beat and I was the patient. I frowned and tightened my fingers around Hiccup's hand. He lifted his head, bleary forest green eyes brightening as he saw I was finally awake.

"Good morning, Milady," he said in a voice hoarse with sleep. "Nice to have you back." I frowned.

"Where have I been?" I asked fuzzily, my voice creaky. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Um…three days," he said in a concerned voice. I blinked, expecting him to grin and admit it's a joke. But he looked gaunt, there were dark circles under his glorious eyes and he was rumpled and unshaven.

"Oh dear," I murmured. "What happened?"

"We were on a date," I murmured, thinking hard. He blushed. "We were on Toothless and you were showing me what a reckless daredevil you are." His lips lifted in a slight smile.

"You noticed, huh?" he said and rubbed the back of his neck, looking embarrassed.

"Then I felt a sharp prick in my arm and then…nothing," I said in a puzzled voice.

"You were hit by a dart," he revealed carefully. "You lost consciousness and almost fell off Toothless. We caught you and brought you here."
"We?"

"Um-couldn't carry you myself. Sorry. So I rode Toothless here." He was staring at the floor. I frowned.

"Hiccup?"

"Oh, don't worry-Toothless and I were both tranked and locked up." He shrugged. "Breaking containment. They really didn't like that!" I half sat up.

"Are you okay?" My voice was concerned. He nodded.

"Better for seeing you," he admitted. "Gods, I-I was worried." I frowned.

"What did they hit me with?" I asked hoarsely. My throat was really dry. "Dragon Root?" He shook his head.

"Auris draconis noxius," he told me softly. "The poisonous DragonEar plant." I looked at him and burst into laughter.

"Seriously? They actually have a plant called that?" I sniggered. He nodded but he wasn't laughing.

"It's described in Bork as a plant used to calm agitated dragons but I looked it up on the World Botany thing," he told me. "It's very poisonous. If we hadn't got you here when we did, you would have died. You stopped breathing, Astrid-almost as soon as you got here. This is why you have such a sore throat: they had to ventilate you. You had your tube out just under two days ago but your conscious mind was shut down. Apparently, if you'd had a much larger dose, you may not have ever woken." I blinked.

"So someone tried to kill me?" I asked him, shocked.

"Hey, it may well have been aimed at me," he suggested. "I am probably public enemy number one."

"Is there any water?" I asked plaintively. He blinked then hit the call button. Ragnar appeared at the door almost immediately and grinned as he saw me awake.

"The sleeper awakes!" he teased. '"Thought we'd have to get a handsome prince in to wake you up!' My hand tightened on Hiccup's.

"Already got one," I told him smugly and stole a glance at Hiccup, who was definitely blushing. "Except the dork didn't try kissing me!" He blushed even more brilliantly and inspected the floor.

"You did?"

"Um, a bit," he admitted. "On the forehead. Once. Sorry sorry sorry..." I squeezed his hand because he looked like he'd strain something looking so anxious.

"That's why it didn't work," I told him smugly. "Lips, every time." He looked into my eyes and saw I wasn't mad and I could see him relaxing a little.

"I'll remember next time," he said shyly. Then Ragnar shooed him back and I saw him push his chair into the corner of the room. For some reason he was wearing shackles which really concerned me: I would need to find out what was going on when I was cleared for discharge. When I next looked, he was slumped in the chair, his head thrown back and he was snoring gently. I smiled: he really had been worried and I guessed he hadn't slept much. It was really very sweet and I felt a
surge of warmth towards him for his attention. I would need to make sure we actually had that date.

Ragnar had finished checking me over and explaining what had happened—pretty much exactly what Hiccup had said but in more detail and with much bigger words—when Fishlegs burst into the room. He looked for Hiccup and vigorously shook him awake.

"AARGH!" Hiccup started and almost jumped from the chair until he saw Fishlegs and he managed a scowl.

"Don't do that, Fish!" he protested sharply. The larger Rider ignored the words, almost jumping with excitement.

"But I thought you should know!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Heather's back! She escaped."
I was released from the infirmary the next day and given four days off work until Gothi was sure I was fit for duty. I was just grateful I'd completed my Finals before all this nonsense so I could put my mind to my dragon and becoming a Rider. I made my way to see Stormfly and the Nadder was delighted to see me. I fed her some fish and spent about twenty minutes just fussing and petting her, then I gave her a little pat and headed back for my room. I needed a change of clothes and a decent shower.

Once I had tidied myself up and felt more normal, I changed into jeans and a T-shirt and an old pair of trainers and went in search of my trainer. Stormfly's wing was healed now and I needed to make up time. After a long and fruitless search throughout the complex, I went to Hiccup's room as last resort and knocked. There was a pause and I heard him shout: "Who's there?"

"Astrid." I leaned against the door frame and waited as I heard the sound of a foot and a prosthetic hitting the floor, mild cursing and then the door opening.

"Er…what are you doing here?" he asked. He looked scruffy, disheveled and in need of a shave. I stared at him.

"Can I come in?" He looked alarmed.

"Er…do you have to?" I glared at him and reluctantly, he stood aside and waved me in. He closed the door and remained standing by it, sagging like an ashamed schoolboy. I stared at his room and my mouth dropped open.

The place was an utter shambles. His bed was shoved against the wall and rumpled: his wardrobe was behind the door and his chest of drawers and desk were against the far wall. The drawers of his desk and chest of drawers were thrown onto the floor and clothes and papers were everywhere. There were pictures and diagrams pinned to the wall and two laptops were laid side by side on the desk but computer parts and cable were randomly tossed everywhere. Books were scattered. The room was completely wrecked. I turned to look at him.

"After Ozzie told me basically to go fuck myself I lost it," he admitted in a shamed voice. I recalled the screams and the crashes. It wasn't a healthy way to deal with rejection but I guessed he had suffered one rejection too many to care.

"But since, haven't you…?" I asked softly. He sighed.

"Debriefing, dragon ride, jail, infirmary…not been here much," he said awkwardly. I rolled my eyes and huffed, then pointed to the chair by the desk.

"SIT!" I snapped. He wearily obeyed as I grabbed the spilled drawers and restored them to their place, then scooped up the strewn clothes and began to fold and stow them. He watched me, his cheeks scorching with shame and just inspected his lap. It took me about five minutes to stow everything, then gather the papers and slam them in a pile on one of the laptops. "I assume you can sort these out," I asked him and he nodded. I looked around, then saw a photograph, under the desk. I swooped down and fished it up, peering at a picture of the little boy with the bright emerald eyes in the embrace of a woman with the same auburn hair and green eyes, her face alive with love and happiness. It was Hiccup with his dead mother. I handed him the image.

"I don't think you want to lose this," I said more gently and he picked it up and blinked.
"No," he said, stroking the image gently with his thumb. I walked to his side and looked over his shoulder.

"You look a lot like her," I commented. He shrugged.

"I remember bits but I was just three when she died," he admitted. "She was soft and warm and kind. She never shouted and always hugged me when I was unhappy." He seemed on the verge of saying something more but stopped himself. I gently rested a hand on his shoulder and he leaned his head against my arm. "Thanks," he said quietly. I nuzzled the top of his head.

"You're welcome," I told him softly. Then I leaned close to him. "You need a clean shirt and a shave and then you are coming with me." He looked up at me, his wide green eyes surprised and trusting and then he levered himself up and made his way towards the small en suite.

"Whatever Milady demands," he said with a small bow and vanished into the tiny room. I heard water running and guessed he was doing what I asked which surprised me. I looked at the images on the wall and realised among the technical diagrams were pictures, beautifully drawn portraits. There was Toothless, the General, Gobber, Ozzie, Heather and Eret, the twins, Fishlegs, Snotlout…and me. I blinked. It was a head and shoulders view of me that must have been drawn from memory from my apartment. And it was really good. I got to my feet and frowned, leaning close to inspect the picture.

I heard Hiccup emerge and he gasped as he saw what I was looking at. "Erm, sorry," he murmured quietly as I turned to see him. He had washed and shaved but was still in his old shirt. I grabbed an olive-green one and lobbed it at him. He stared then coughed. "Erm, would you mind…?" he asked in an embarrassed voice. I stared and then realised what he meant.

"Oh, sorry," I apologised and turned away. How shy was he? I had seen it all anyway but he was still really self-conscious. I turned back to see if he was done and caught purple bruises across his midriff and half a dozen bright red and purple target lesions in his chest as he fumbled the buttons. "Hiccup?" I began but he sighed.

"What do you want with me now?" he asked.

"Lunch and a lesson," I suggested. "I bet you haven't eaten-I certainly haven't-and then you can come and help me figure out what I should be doing with Stormfly. I've been visiting her-when not poisoned by some exotic plant, obviously-but I don't know what to do next." He gave a small smile and offered me his arm.

"Then let me show you, Milady," he said chivalrously and I grinned as I slipped my arm through his and we made our way to the canteen. He was still limping badly but he denied he was in any pain (it was obvious he was from the tightness round his eyes and mouth as he walked) and calmly steered the conversation away from himself. We chose a corner table, away from the support staff-who were surprisingly becoming more friendly-and the Riders, who certainly weren't. I cast a glance at them: they were very rowdy and raucous, all clustered around Heather, who was sitting with a grin like the cat who got the cream with Eret's arm draped protectively over her shoulders. I knew they had thrown a party for her return, though neither Hiccup nor I had been invited. I had been in the infirmary but I knew it had bothered Hiccup.

He ate silently, trying not to listen to the snide comments that kept drifting his way. Eret and Snotlout seemed to be having some sort of competition over who could make the most abusive comment about their leader and he suddenly dropped his fork and glared at the plate. He stared at the plate and he was breathing heavily. "You know," he said tightly, "it's amazing how those idiots spend so much effort on partying and insults and so little on practising with their dragons." He was
trembling and I could see anger on his eyes. The last comment had been something about his mother.

"So what else do I need to know?" I asked, trying to distract him. He lifted his glittering eyes and took a slow breath.

"Riding is about trust and instinct," he told me more calmly. "You have to trust your dragon but maintain control. You are the driver. You lean, shift your weight to change direction. Lean back to go up and forward to go down and land. Use your voice as well: be calm and firm. Reinforce commands vocally. If your dragon decides to fight you, hang on and ask yourself why. It is about communication: the dragon must listen to the rider but sometimes, the rider must listen to the dragon."

"Where does the daredevil thing come in?" I asked him. He gave a slight smile.

"That's the idiot bit of me," he admitted. "Spent my entire life being the last boy chosen for any team, the failure in sports, the joke—and then suddenly I find myself the rider of the fastest dragon on Midgard. And I…loved the freedom, the speed, the feeling that I was part of something unique and special. That I didn't have to be useless." I stared at him and put my hand on his.

"You are the most amazing person I know," I told him honestly. "I can't think of anyone less useless. You just aren't especially skilled at hand to hand combat or chatting up girls…" And he shot a wry smile, a faint flush rising in his cheeks. "But you are fantastic at IT things, a great artist, a Dragon Rider, a really patient trainer and a caring and decisive leader." He shook his head, looking self-conscious again.

"Um, maybe one of those?" he suggested flatly.

"Hey, Hiccup?" It was Heather, who had come over to look down on us—literally. He looked up at her and nodded.

"Good to have you back, Heather," he said tonelessly. She smiled, the expression not reaching her grey eyes.

"We missed you at the party," she said. I frowned: that was a pretty sharp jab.

"Was there a party? No one told me," Hiccup replied sarcastically. She gave a small smile and I looked at her closely. Hiccup had said she was one of the best and most responsible riders and a good trainer. In fact, he had offered her as an alternative to him. But she was deliberately baiting him and I was glad this snide bitch wasn't anywhere near me and my dragon.

"Oh, never mind—it went well without you-like they usually do," she added. "All my friends were there…oh, that explains it!" I caught the instantaneous flash of pain in his eyes. Then she turned to me. "Oh hi…it's Astrid, isn't it?" I stared stonily at her.

"Sorry-who are you again?" I shot back.

"Funny," she said snidely. "Are you a Rider? I don't see your dragon…"

"Hardly-since this is a canteen," I retorted. "Gosh, I just had a time warp. Am I back in High School and are you the school bitch?" She gave a much nastier smile.

"Then what does that make hop-along here?" she sneered.

"Heather—I think you need to go and stroke Eret's ego some more," Hiccup suggested. "He may be
feeling neglected with you over here drooling over me." She turned to him like a striking snake.

"I hardly need Useless to tell me what to do!" she snapped. "I am second in command and I can actually run things far better than you…"

"I think you'll find that position has changed," I said with a cold smile. "You carry on organising parties, Helen. I'll help run the unit." I lifted my plate. "Ready?" I asked Hiccup but he had picked up my cue and was already on his feet.

"You have no idea," he said grimly and we walked out without a backwards glance.

"Assholes," I muttered and he looked at me with a smirk.

"You wanted to hit her, didn't you?" he asked. "Girls fighting over me-Thor, my life is looking up…"

"Tell anyone and I'll make you eat that metal leg!" I threatened him half-heartedly. He grinned back at me.

"Do that and you'll never be able to ride that dragon properly!" he reminded me and I skipped alongside.

"Yessir, whatever you say, sir!" I teased him and he threw me a very sloppy salute as we approached Pen Five. I paused at the door and looked to him for advice but he invited me to lead: this was my dragon. I took a breath, let us in and called her. To my joy, she came immediately and I ran forward to embrace her, talking gently to her and rubbing her face gently. "Hiya, girl," I smiled. "You remember Hiccup?" He took a limping step forward and let her sniff his hand. Then he walked to her side and laced his hands together.

"Get on her back," he said quietly. "She trusts you well enough." I gave her a stroke, then put my foot in his hands and accepted the boost into position. She gave a little shuffle and then settled. I smiled at him.

"What next?" I asked.

He got me to walk her up and down, learning to direct her with my legs and by shifting my weight slightly. He taught me how to hold on and how to secure myself if she suddenly changed position. And finally, he got me to fly-just a short hover, leaning left or right to learn to direct her-and then land. Each time, I gave clear commands as I shifted my weight so one day, she would respond to the words as well as the weight shifts. All the way through, he watched, he encouraged and he smiled.

I have to say, I was exhausted but exhilarated at the end. My rear was pretty sore as well, even though we had got a maximum of ten feet off the ground. I frowned and gave a surreptitious rub after I had dismounted and given her a huge amount of fuss. He grinned as he walked forward and draped an arm over my shoulders. "Sore?" he asked.

"Astonishingly so," I admitted.

"Dragon hide is pretty tough," he told me. "It has to be, what with being flameproof. So you will need a saddle. I've already drafted one and it is being made up by Technical-along with your flight suit."

"Flight suit?" I frowned and then recalled the outfits the Riders had been wearing.
"Camouflaged suits so that if the dragon is spotted, they can't distinguish a Rider," he explained. "They are also lightweight, bulletproof, flameproof, insulated and come with a face-mask and coms. The only thing they don't have is autopilot but that kinda comes built in..." I laughed.

"So what colour..."

"Same as your Nadder-predominantly blue with a hint of gold," he explained. "You need to look part of the dragon from a distance."

"And do you have one?" I asked. He nodded. "What colour?"

"Black. Matches Toothless," he admitted and he looked down. The suits were skintight and emphasised every contour. For someone as self-conscious as he was, it wouldn't help his confidence. Especially compared to specimens like Snotlout and Eret.

"And will I get to see this on you?" I asked teasingly. He shrugged.

"One day," he sighed as I dragged him out of the Pen. I hauled him along towards Pen Eleven and he froze. "NO-wait! I'm not allowed to..." I turned to him with a smirk. This was my surprise for him.

"Do you remember what your father actually said to you when he restricted your access to Toothless?" I asked. I had checked, of course. He nodded.

"Not allowed to see Toothless without permission from a commissioned officer..." he murmured and then I smiled.

"And what rank am I, Commander Dragon Boy?" I teased him.

"Um, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah—the lowest commissioned rank," I reminded him and my grin grew wider. "I think somebody needs a good scratch..." His face lit and he gave me a fierce hug.

"Thank you," he whispered in my ear and then turned and opened the door to the pen. A delighted roar met him as he scrambled in, with me quietly walking after him as I heard his heartfelt greeting.

"Toothless..."

OoO

"Report, Savage!"

"The dart was effective but she survived-just. Expert medical help was required. A higher dose would prove more immediately lethal. But the hazard is higher. They will be on the watch-out now."

"Fortunately, we 'ave more than one player in the base, eh, Dagur?"

"No shit, Al. My baby sister will twist them round her little finger and ensure that no one suspects poor innocent little Heather!"

"Do we 'ave an extraction plan for the boy and 'is dragon?"

"Three. All require significant degradation of operational capacity of the base."
"Meaning’?"

"All Hel needs to break loose, Al. When we have chaos, we can have Hiccup and Toothless."

"My buyer is getting impatient and we need a sample to offer up before ’e makes ’is own plans to get a dragon. Acquire the Nadder as a demonstration of our capability. Once we ’ave her, activate the plan and get me that Night Fury. And then you can have yer little playmate, Dagur!"

"Hiccup...brother...it's gonna be so much fun! All that delicious screaming and begging...I can't wait until I've got my hands on you again! And this time, no one will be able to save you!"
I paused at the door that evening, unfamiliar self-consciousness surging through my body. It had been ages since I went to a girls' night and I was aware I wasn't really friends with any of these people. In fact, I had been astonished when Heather had come to my room, apologised and asked me to come over to get to know 'the girls'. I shook myself: what was the worst that could happen? If I wasn't enjoying myself, I could just walk out! I knocked.

Heather opened the door and gave a smile. "Come in, come in!" she invited and ushered me into a room that was far cosier than mine. She had her bed against the wall at the far end with Ruff and Cami already there, having a shoving fight on the bed and there was also a bean-bag against the long wall and low table in the centre of the room. She handed me a paper cup with what was undeniably wine in it and dragged me to the chair. "Have a seat!" she grinned and plumped down on the beanbag, sipping her wine and inviting me to tuck into the tortilla chips on the table. I gaped: how the hell had she got hold of all this stuff?

"Thanks," I said and took a sip. Heather gave a much more genuine smile and I wondered if she had been acting-but why would an adult act like a stupid High School kid, trying to keep in with the cool crowd?

"There are so few of us girls we all need to stick together," Heather started. "I know we kinda got off on the wrong foot-and we have to put our hands up for that. We didn't exactly welcome you, Astrid. But you are one of us and we oughtta try to get to know each other." I inspected her: her delivery was clear and she was clearly trying to reach out. The others were nudging each other but I knew I had been hard on them as well and I shrugged.

"I agree," I said and sipped my wine. And then they all looked expectantly at me. I sighed. "You want me to start?" I guessed and Ruff grinned.

"Yeah-spill the dirt, sister!" she encouraged and I sat back. Eventually, I told them pretty much everything-though not in excruciating detail. But they were sympathetic about the loss of my family and astonished when they heard what I had achieved. Cami frowned at me and put a finger up.

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You entered the army at seventeen, did Sandhurst at eighteen during your first year of Uni, are actually really a commissioned officer and have led exercises and been all over the country and you've just finished your medical degree and are already partway through a trauma internship with Gothi?" I nodded.

"Um, that's about it," I admitted. They stared at me.

"And you just bonded a dragon as well?"

"Stormfly, yeah," I smiled.
"And you thought the General may not want to keep you?" Heather's voice was astonished.

"Er, yeah?"

"No wonder you chewed us a new one!" Ruff sighed. "We must look like a bunch of cadets to you!" She actually looked downcast and I felt a twinge of guilt.

"No, just amateurs," I murmured and drained my cup, stretching over and refilling my wine. "But I realise this is a different kind of unit and you interact a bit differently. What was happening, though, was totally unacceptable. I just hated seeing you picking on Hiccup!" All three of them rolled their eyes.

"Puh-leeze!" Cami scoffed. "He's got 'kick me' written all over him. He comes over all meek and pathetic but he can't resist breaking rules and getting away with it." I listened more closely.

"Oh?"

"He plays the geeky dork perfectly," Heather said, "but he's pretty manipulative all the same. He just 'wandered' into the hatching pit during the first hatching? Yeah, I really believe that! The little bastard was waiting his chance and just managed to walk in as the Night Fury hatched? My brother tried to stop him but he shoved past and went straight for the little black hatchling. It was so impressionable that he bonded before anyone else could get near. And once there, he was in!"

"We were all selected and screened for this mission," Cami explained. "The psych bods ran all sorts of tests to deem us suitable. We all passed. He was never screened."

I could believe that. But as I looked across the room, I wondered what kind of weird criteria they used to allow Cami and Ruff to pass. My eyes lingered on the female twin.

"Hey!" she protested as she felt my eyes on her. "I passed!"

"How?" I asked bluntly. The wine was loosening my tongue: I hadn't drunk for ages and I seemed to have become a total lightweight. Ruff grinned.

"Tuff and I passed all screening," she reminded me.

"But why are you here in the first place?"

"Oh, the tragic tale of our lives will have you crying into your sauv blanc!" she began and Cami nudged her with a snort. "Okay-we joined the army because it was the only way to blow stuff up legally!" she laughed. My eyes widened and then I shrugged. That actually made sense.

"And you?" I turned my gaze to the smaller fidgety blonde girl. She grinned.

"My name's the clue," she admitted. I frowned. Voleur….I grasped at my GCSE French.

"Thief?"

"Burglar," she corrected me. "My family were travellers-Irish travellers. Hence we were actually referred to as Bog Burglars. My Mam was head of our little Clan, the Chiefess. Our culture was to take what we needed-and what we didn't for sport, though we returned anything of personal value to the owners. We did trade as well. We valued travel and skill over wealth or show. But we were always persecuted and outcast, never welcomed and always moved on. I loved the travel but always wanted to show them-outsiders-that I was worth as much as they were. My culture was different but I was still a human being like them. My Mam decided I needed an education and a set
of new experiences so I could be a better Chieftess after her. I chose the army-discipline, strength, focus. But when I went to where I was supposed to meet with them after basic training, they were gone. I have no idea where they are. Every leave, I search but I haven't had any contact, any sign of them for four years. One day I will find them again. But until then, this place is perfect. Adventure, excitement, dragons...what's not to like?"

I warmed to her boundless enthusiasm, her optimism in light of her sadness. "You got it," I agreed. Then I looked at Heather. She smiled gently, her grey eyes warming as she stared at me.

"What can I say?" she shrugged. "Twin older brothers—both in the army, one active, one in IT and technical support. Where else was I going to end up?" She grinned. "And contrary to popular belief, I love both my brothers and they both care for me. Dagur is very protective and funny and Ozzie is the sensible, voice of reason one. I wasn't going to go anywhere that separated me from them so when they signed up, I did too."

I nodded, inspecting my wine. How did Dagur pass the psych testing? He was crazy as a bucket of frogs. I seriously made a mental note to look through the criteria they used for acceptance to the programme. Anything which thought the twins, Dagur and Snotlout were prime candidates had to be seriously weird. But Heather had carried on talking. "He gets a lot of bad press and it's not all true," she was explaining, taking my silence as an invitation to continue. "I mean, Hiccup keeps claiming he was beaten up by my brother, that he tortured him but...really? Does he expect us to believe he's so pathetic he could be beaten up like a High School kid?" I recalled the broken ribs and old breaks in his fingers, the fresh breaks after Dagur had captured him, the horrific sight of Dagur twisting the knife in his stump and the gut-wrenching sounds of Hiccup's agonised screams in that snowy twilight by the loch. I blinked.

"Yeah, it sounds pretty implausible," I murmured, hating myself for bad-mouthing Hiccup. My hackles were rising because there was an agenda here. Hiccup's a manipulative bad guy and poor innocent misunderstood Dagur doesn't deserve his bad press. *Like hell he doesn't!"

"Eret says he was whining about being tortured while he was under interrogation here," Heather continued. I said nothing, recalling the wounds. I could understand why the hierarchy would want to suppress that piece of information: their security was like a sieve but that could only have happened with an insider. Why had no one been caught yet? "I mean, please! Can't see that happening either. It's all lies to cover up his own crimes. He stole the Night Fury! And led us in a chase halfway across the country! He should be in jail but instead, he's still in charge."

I emptied my cup once more and grabbed a mouthful of tortilla chips. I chewed hard because it was the only way to release my anger without shouting at these girls. I was feeling uncomfortable and really didn't feel I could trust Heather.

"Yeah, but I'm second in command," I reminded them.

"Girl power!" Ruff whooped. "You will fill us in, sister, about what's going one?" I nodded.

"Where I can," I added.

"You're spending a lot of time with him," Cami said suddenly. "Are you two a thing?" Were we? I sort of hoped we were but Hiccup still seemed not to be sure. Though his utter lack of self-confidence didn't help him recognise what was right beneath his nose.

"Not sure," I said honestly.

"He made a pass at me," Heather announced. I stared at her. I can't believe that because he could
barely talk to me. His wretched story about his only previous attempt at a date had clearly been genuine and that set all sorts of alarm bells ringing about what I was hearing. "He really wouldn't take no for an answer. Watch him. That cute dorky act is just that—an act!" I swallowed and looked at her, hearing the venom in her words. Her story would fit for Snotlout but not Hiccup. I nodded and fiddled with my hands, blushing.

"I mean, why?" Ruff asked directly. "He's skinny and lopsided and can't even speak without stammering and quite frankly, we all thought he was into guys anyway!" I stared at her.

"Wh-what?" I knew some specialist units were pretty vicious in how they deal with their weaker members but this was starting to get me annoyed.

"Yeah—I know Dagur wanted to have him," Heather put in. "He still does. He reckons he'll be a good ride in the sack!"

"Actually, he's into girls," I put in quietly. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Yeah—I mean why would you want that scrawny creep when you could have some really buff guys?" Ruff ploughed on. "Eret, Snotlout, Dogsbreath…I mean, like wow!"

"I think Eret's taken," Heather put in sweetly, throwing a chip at her.

"Even Fish," Ruff mused, her eyes closed and a happy smile on her face. "He looks like he could make a girl happy…"

"Dog's a pretty cool guy as well," Cami put in, nudging her friend and I sat back, rolling my eyes. This was precisely what I hated about girls' nights: gossip, backbiting and mooning over guys. My gaze slithered back over Heather: there was something about her I didn't trust. I knew she had lied about Hiccup and was doing her best to badmouth and undermine him. Why? To make me suspicious of him? What was the point? What was her PLAN? So I pulled my feet under my body, grabbed some more chips before Heather tossed them all at Ruff and tried to look interested. I hoped Hiccup was having a better evening than I was.

Hiccup was so focussed on his work in the IT lab that he didn't hear the steps approach until he caught the reflection in the screen. He sat up abruptly, still not comfortable with anyone coming up behind him. He stiffened as he recognised the shape in the screen.

"Hey, Hic…"

"Fuck off, Ozzie." Hiccup's tone was sharp and biting.

"Look, I may have overreacted…"

"Go away."

"I was upset…"

"SO WAS I!" Hiccup swung round to face him, his eyes flashing. "Watching one of your friends kidnapped does that to you. Being told to hand yourself over to torture or death does that to you!"

"You're overreacting!"

"Says the dick who came in and punched me in the face!"
"My sister had just been kidnapped!"

"And that was my fault…why?"

Ozzie stared at Hiccup. The Rider was breathing hard, his eyes dark with anger and hurt. Ozzie knew that Hiccup really didn't have many friends, hardly anyone he could trust or confide in. And he had realised that having one his very few people turn on him when he was clearly already feeling guilty must have been almost impossible to cope with.

"It wasn't," he admitted. Hiccup glared at him, then sat down.

"Good. Now fuck off." His tone was final. Ozzie sat down next to him and folded his arms.

"Make me," he said firmly.

"Okay, I'll go!" Hiccup snapped and lurched to his feet, hissing as his stump protested at the sudden pressure. Ozzie grabbed him and shoved him back on the chair.

"Now you're behaving like a sulky kid!" he scoffed.

"Says the utter prick!" Hiccup snapped back.

"We need to talk." Hiccup stared at him.

"No, we needed to talk about an hour after you punched me or at worst, the next morning, you asshole! Not four days later after your precious sister implausibly reappears," he snapped. "I needed you when Astrid was sick. Or when I was shot for getting her to the infirmary and breaching containment to do it. I don't need you now, Ozzie. I've come to terms with the fact you—like everyone else—blamed me for something I had no control over, beat me up and dumped me like trash! There's nothing left to say!"

"There's masses left to say!" Ozzie shouted in his face. Hiccup flinched but glared back.

"No, you had your chance and you blew it," he said stiffly. He grasped the desk and levered himself to his feet with a wince. Ozzie grabbed his wrist and shoved him back in the chair, rather harder than was necessary. Then he pulled up a file and turned the screen.

"Alvin's specialist equipment was sourced via a network of holding and ghost companies," he said hurriedly. "They were all eventually delivered via Maiestas Logistics, a branch of Perfidia Industries, a wholly owned subsidiary of Outcast Holdings." He tapped a couple of keys. "Delivery address was…here…" Hiccup glanced across.

"Lanarkshire?" he murmured. "Really? He's got Dagur and the Skrill a few minutes flight from downtown Glasgow? How—how is that gonna work?" Then he stared hard at Ozzie. "This doesn't change anything!" he snapped.

"Hic—you gotta get over it!" Ozzie told him. The Rider shoved his chair back, away from the other man, shaking his head.

"No, you need to understand, you fuckwit," he said, breathing heavily. "I don't trust easily, Ozzie. And I can't trust you now. Not after…" He stopped and stared at the screen. Ozzie sighed.

"I was wrong," he said awkwardly. "I—I…" Hiccup rubbed his forehead with his hand and then looked away.
"That's the best you can do?" he asked sarcastically. "Four days and that was all you could come up with? Gods, I could do better in five minutes with a concussion!"

"What do you want me to say?" Ozzie snapped. Hiccup snapped his head round to glare at him.

"Let me think... how about 'Hiccup, I was really wrong to blame you. I should have known you would do everything you could to save her. I know you were not even involved in planning the damned exercise and only had to step in when Snotlout fucked the whole thing up per expectations. I know you would never help Dagur. I know what I said to you was excessively cruel because I know how my brother has fucked you up ever since you came here and I know you still have nightmares about what he's done to you including have his dragon take your leg. I know he really wants to hurt you and I would never wish that on you. And I know he will protect my sister anyway. So let's work together and see if we can get her back.' But of course, none of that occurred because you were punching me in the fucking face!"

"I'm really sorry," Ozzie sighed. Hiccup stared at the desk.

"So am I," he said quietly, the fight oozing from his voice and frame. He took a shuddering breath and debated if he should give him a chance. He sighed. "Look, if you are really serious about this, prove it." Ozzie stared at him and then slowly nodded.

"Okay," he said warily. Hiccup frowned and swung his emerald gaze to lock with Ozzie's pale green eyes.

"Then find out why your sister is lying," he said directly. Ozzie's eyes flared and his fists clenched.

"What did you say?" His voice was low and menacing. Hiccup took a slow breath.

"I've seen her report about what happened. How come she has no idea where she was kept hostage?" he asked. "She flew from there on Windshear! And this is Heather we're talking about-one of the smartest and best of the Riders. Oh-and former Army Orienteering Champion! If anyone could read the terrain and give us a route, it would be her."

"She said she was drugged," Ozzie retorted, his tone a low growl.

"Been there, done that," Hiccup snapped back. "To be able to escape, she would have enough recollection to get us in the ballpark. But she apparently remembers nothing. Not plausible."

"But if she was traumatised..."

"This is HEATHER we're talking about!" Hiccup snapped. "She is tough. She's lost her parents and has you two for brothers! She wouldn't just crumble like a little girl and forget everything. I know my Dad and especially Spitelout would accept that but I don't. I know her, Ozzie. And in your heart, so do you. Something happened in there and her story doesn't add up. Find out what happened."

Ozzie glared at him and folded his arms. "You know she says you're manipulative and devious," he accused Hiccup. The Rider shook his head.

"Much as I'd like to accept that compliment, it's not true. I'm just suspicious and very exposed," he said quietly. "Security here is a joke and if she's compromising it, we need to stop her. Not to hurt her, but prevent Alvin and Dagur getting dragons as weapons. And to get back the sister you know. You have to understand that, Oz!"

The other man glared. "I'll see what I can find out," he growled. "But if you're wrong..."
"If I'm wrong, I'll gladly apologise to you both," Hiccup said tonelessly. "But I'm not wrong. She didn't escape: they let her go. And I need to understand why-before someone gets killed."
My training accelerated after that first lesson. Hiccup insisted I train twice a day, learning to fly and spending time with my dragon. He was kind, patient and determined to make me a better Rider. He also moved Stormfly to Pen One again because she needed more room to fly and she needed the room of the largest Pen.

But I was apprehensive. Scratch that-I was just plain scared. I had been flying in that pen and I had nearly died…and I didn't want to go there again. But Hiccup was kind, supportive and reassuring.

"I will be there with you, every step of the way-and so will Toothless," he told me gently, his hand grasping mine, his warm fingers lacing with mine. I leaned against him, feeling his body firm against my back. He rested his chin on the top of my head and breathed deeply. "I won't let anything happen."

"You better not-or I'll come back and haunt you!" I grumbled softly. He wrapped an arm around me and squeezed.

"Don't worry, Milady," he murmured. "You won't be haunting me any time soon."

"Well, that fills me with confidence," I shot back sarcastically.

But he insisted that coms were augmented to the Pen and that at least one other Rider accompanied us during lessons. However, he was very cautious who he asked-and I could understand his reticence. I wouldn't fancy having Snotlout, Eret or Dogsbreath Donald watching my lesson and passing all sorts of disparaging comments. Hiccup instead asked Fishlegs, Bucket and Mulch. The latter two were the oldest Riders, brothers who had been deemed suitable by whatever crazy screening procedures they used and with no family to miss them. Between them they rode the spiny blind dragon-the Whispering Death (yep-yet another stupid name. Why Whispering Death?)—and the white cold-breathing dragon, the Snow Wraith. Actually, that name made some kind of sense. But the men were tolerant, unobtrusive and reliable and watched with kindly smiles as I began simple exercises on Stormfly.

Hiccup had transferred Toothless back to Pen One and, as promised, he rode the Night Fury during every lesson, hovering alongside and demonstrating manoeuvres and tips. By the third day, we were starting to fly in synchronisation, climbing, diving, swooping and banking side by side and one after another to improve my abilities to work as part of a team. Actually, it was tremendous fun, flying together and speeding as fast as we could in the confines of the cave.

He also taught me to use Stormfly's armourments: her flame and her spines. Her flame was awesome, brilliant as magnesium and hot enough to melt rock. It was exhilarating to swoop down a strafe a patch of rock, the magnesium-bright flames reducing the target to a pool of red goo. Stormfly was quick and responsive, loving praise and glorying in showing off. I found that touching a specific spot on the back of her head got her to fire a spine directly forward with astonishing accuracy. She could also fire a spread of spines when encouraged, again with great accuracy. I found myself ridiculously proud of my girl.

It was the last day of my time off the infirmary when Hiccup gave me two presents: my saddle and my uniform. He had fitted the saddle carefully, showing me the attachments and I settled on the soft leather cautiously and a slow smile lit my face: it was moulded to my posterior (I cast Hiccup a suspicious glance-how had he managed that so accurately? He had blushed.) and really comfortable. I had made him turn around as I changed into my flight suit and had called him to turn
back once it was on. I gave a twirl.

"Well?" He stood staring at me, his jaw open and green eyes wide with astonishment—and then his face moved into a slow, admiring smile.

"Stunning," he murmured, his cheeks heating with an embarrassed blush. "Er…wow." I glanced down: the thing was form-fitting and pretty flattering but it was also—thankfully—my favourite azure and pale blue and I know that suited my eyes and my golden hair. I flipped the braid over one shoulder pointedly and he ran his hand nervously through his messy auburn hair.

"Thank you, Commander Dragon Boy!" I smirked. He gave a small bow.

"Why, you're welcome, Milady!" he replied and his eyes twinkled as he watched me mount up, then leapt onto Toothless—just as the door opened and a group of the other Riders ambled noisily in. Hiccup stiffened and Toothless backed away, his form tense—because he could feel the sudden tension in his Rider. Stormfly also shuffled her feet, unused to an audience.

"Look—it's Commander Useless!" Snotlout sneered and Hiccup winced.

"This is a private lesson," he growled.

"And our dragons are here as well, Useless!" Eret sneered. "We're all part of the same team and have a right to be here." Heather gave a nod and stalked forward.

"Well, you can see my dragon now," I called to her and she tossed her head.

"Just a Nadder," she said dismissively. I frowned: that was just plain rude.

"C'mon, Astrid," Hiccup said in a tight voice, as close to exasperation as I had heard. "Up." And we both took off in perfect synchronisation, backwinging away from the Riders and wheeling left and up towards the roof. "Ignore those mutton-heads. Look only at me. Listen only to me. It doesn't matter what they say: it only matters what you feel." He paused. "Okay?"

I nodded. Below me, the others were already betting on how long it would take for me to fall off and I tightened my grasp on the saddle. Stormfly gave a little squawk as Hiccup smiled at me.

"Okay—dive and climbs by three!" he called and we dived, skimmed the lake and ferociously climbed, then repeated. After three, he wheeled sideways and I followed, playing follow-the-leader, my favourite game on dragonback. We spiralled, looped the loop, criss-crossed and finally landed. Snotlout folded his arms.

"Kids stuff!" he scoffed. Hiccup raised an eyebrow.

"Prove it!" he challenged them and, true to form, they took up the challenge. Snotlout, Gustav and Dogsbreath all kind of managed but they were much sloppier than I had been and Eret was far less accurate: his dragon was much bigger and heavier and manoeuvred less sharply. The twins' Zippleback crashed into the lake on the first pass and they remained in the water, arguing. Fishlegs—who was on monitoring duty—almost fell off Meatlug laughing. Cami managed a solid run on her colour-changing dragon—a Hobblegrump—before Heather leapt onto Windshear and aggressively attacked the exercise. She was inexplicably angry and I looked at Hiccup, who was frowning.

"Slow down, Heather," he called. "Windshear is getting very low…PULL UP!" But she slammed into the shallow lake and went down hard. Hiccup and Toothless were in the air in a moment and fished the jet-haired girl out of the water, dropping her limp, dripping shape on the mossy ground. I leapt down and was at her side before anyone else, carefully inspecting her and checking her basic
observations. She opened her eyes with a snap and cursed but I gently restrained her and stared into her face.

"Easy, easy—you hit pretty hard," I soothed her, squinting at her pupils. To me they looked mildly dilated but she scowled and tried to get up.

"I'm fine!" she snapped. I peered into her face.

"Up slowly," I advised her but she shrugged me off.

"I'm fine!" she snapped and got to her feet with an angry flounce and immediately went to snuggle with Eret.

"Of course. What would I know?" I muttered and got up. Hiccup shrugged.

"Clearly nothing of any value, doctor," he replied sarcastically then cast Eret an irritated glance which he fully returned and motioned me to get back on Stormfly. "Look, I was meaning to save this but this pack of mutton-heads has just made the decision for me," he said quickly, checking his wrist com and nodding. "Optimal conditions—motion sensors are clear, cloud layer is low—below summit height and there's no rain." He grinned. "We're going out!"

"WHAT?" I gulped and he took off, beckoning for me to follow. We swooped round the roof and then he arrowed down towards the back of the huge cavern, to a shadowed set of two storey high brushed steel double doors. He thumbed his wrist com and the doors cracked open, yawning wide as we barrelled forward. Then we swooped through and out into the glen. I gasped as the cold air hit my face and Stormfly gave a loud squawk of excitement. Toothless accelerated, thrilled to be out in the fresh air once more. And then I looked around and we hovered in astonishment.

The glen behind the base was completely surrounded by mountains, their summits hidden in the low cloud layer, the grey almost forming an insubstantial roof over the valley. We had this whole place as our practice arena and I suddenly felt a smile crack my face. Hiccup swooped round and hovered Toothless by me. He was grinning widely, the breeze tugging his hair wildly. "The whole glen is surrounded by motion sensors to detect any intruders or casual observers," he explained. "The roads up here have all been blocked or scrubbed out and the cloud layer means we cannot be seen by satellite or aerial surveillance. And there is more than enough room to allow us to practice all manoeuvres and work out as a team. Or just fly really, really fast!" And he swooped away. I frowned.

"Oh-so that's how it is, Dragon Boy?" I shouted after him as the others emerged and they looked up to see me lean forward flat over Stormfly's neck and accelerate after the Night Fury. I could feel my girl putting all her effort into the chase, her wings really pumping hard and head down. She was closing and then I heard the tell-tale whine of streamlined wings slicing through the air and I knew Hiccup had accelerated. But Stormfly wasn't giving up and, improbably, we closed. We were closing on the head of the valley and I knew he would have to slow down or risk crashing: I grinned and drove my dragon faster to catch him. We were almost within a couple of lengths when he banked suddenly and Toothless's tail collapsed, spiralling the black dragon wildly towards the ground with a despairing roar. I spun Stormfly into a tight spiral as he had shown me and we arrowed down after them. Hiccup was lying low over the dragon's neck, not making a move.

"HICCUP!" I screamed. "HICCUP!"

He moved slightly, a hand wafting vaguely at his prosthetic left leg and I could see his knuckles whiten on the edge of the saddle. I saw his head lift and his left leg visibly wrenched in the pedal. The tail fin flipped open and the wild plummet began to slow, but they were out of height and
though Toothless began to regain control, they hit the ground hard.

"NO!" I cried and dived down, landing Stormfly by them and leaping from the saddle. I ran to them and urgently pulled Hiccup up, wrapping an arm around him and inspecting his face. He was conscious but his face was scrunched into an agonised grimace, his hands fisted and knuckles white.

"My leg," he hissed. "Went…into spasm. Couldn't keep the tail open! Is…Toothless…?" I glanced down but the dragon was already moving, shaking his head and looking distinctly grumpy. I tightened my grasp around him.

"He looks mad, so I guess that means he's fine," I reported. He visibly relaxed. "How 'bout you?" He flinched and buried his head against my shoulder, shuddering.

"Gods, I haven't had one this bad…for ages…" he whispered. I leaned over and stroked his head.

"Can you get your leg free?" I asked softly. He shook his head, a hand grasping at me and tightening painfully as he fought against the spasm.

"N-no…" he whispered. I pulled away from him and I could see him curl up, clutching his fists to his middle against the pain. I sped round to the other side and grabbed his leg, then-knowing it would hurt him-I pulled the prosthetic free of the control pedal. He moaned. Instantly, I grabbed him again and as he clutched at me, his questing grasp desperate for comfort. I hauled him from the saddle and away, against a rock and onto the damp ground. He gasped and grabbed his leg. I knelt by him.

"Let me," I said gently and pulled at his prosthetic, dragging his jeans leg up and freeing the straps. He tried to stop me but I pushed his hands away and freed the stump, then gently felt the tightly knotted muscles in the truncated limb. I dug my fingers deep into the cramping muscle and he gave a pained cry, but then I felt the muscle loosen slightly. Despite his pitiful whimpers, I fiercely kneaded the muscle, easing the tension and allowing the interrupted blood flow to be restored. Suddenly, the tension eased from his rigid shape and he allowed his sweat-soaked face to drop back.

"Thanks," he sighed and let out a shuddering breath. He had bitten his lip bloody in an attempt not to cry out and his eyes were weary with the pain he had just endured. I crawled to his side and sat by him, wrapping an arm around him and he leaned against me, his arm draping over my shoulders.

"Does this happen often?" I asked him. He shrugged wearily and sighed.

"Varies," he admitted. "I should have expected it: the leg has had a pretty tough time recently." Toothless turned to face him and nuzzled against his other side and Hiccup gave a slight smile. "Sorry, bud-my fault," he sighed. Toothless gave him a sticky lick and then settled down by him. He shimmied harder against me.

"Can you fly?" I asked him. He shook his head.

"It will take a little while for it to settle," he admitted tightly. The pain had eased but the ravaged muscles still ached, fibres torn and bruised from the intense cramp. "You head back-I'll follow as soon as I can bear to put the prosthetic back on." I shook my head, realising how much pain he must be in to admit that.

"Not a chance, Dragon Boy," I told him determinedly, snuggling up closer to him. "If I let you out of my sight, you're like as not to end up kidnapped by Alvin, Dagur or some other bad guy we don't
even know about!" He groaned and lay harder against me, moving his left leg slightly.

"You have very little faith in me," he murmured, resting his head against mine, "but then, I guess I have managed to get into more trouble than average."

"You betcha," I shot back cheerfully. "Well, at least we're out. And the countryside round here is pretty. Maybe I can go hill-walking on my day off-hah!" He managed a slight frown.

"Day off. Day off? Hmm, never heard of that," he muttered and pressed his lips to the side of my head, ghosting a slight kiss on my hair. "You know, you are riding really well, Astrid. Your manoeuvrability is improving by the day and Stormfly is really responding to you. You almost caught me."

I moved slightly, enjoying the warmth leaching from his lean shape. My eyes flicked across the valley, seeing the other Riders swooping and playing with their dragons and my eyes fell on the silver dragon, weaving a lazy path through the other dragons.

"Heather's off," I murmured. "I know you said she was really competent and trustworthy but she seems to be an utter bitch. She's undermining you non-stop and keeps trying to rehabilitate Dagur. I'm sorry but I don't trust her."

"I wouldn't," he advised me tightly. "Her story is off. She claims she can't recall the way to Alvin's. I don't buy it. And you're right: she's like her own evil twin. Something happened to her while she was captured."

He sighed. "I asked Ozzie to talk to her, see if he could find anything out." I frowned and glanced up.

"Ozzie?" I said in shock. "But I thought…" I stopped. It was his business and he had to live his own life…even though I hated the idea of Ozzie just being forgiven when he had hurt Hiccup so badly. He gave a crooked smile.

"He came to see me," he murmured. "He has an address for Alvin…possibly. But I don't want to act on it if Heather is a traitor because all that will happen will be for us to fly into a trap."

"Copy it to me," I suggested. "If anything happens, at least I'll have a copy and I'll know where you are." He opened his weary emerald eyes and looked at me.

"Wow, that wounds me," he murmured. "But you're right. You're my second in command and you need to know what I know." I fidgeted.

"Have you forgiven him…or is it not my business?" I asked him. He paused and closed his eyes. He took a couple of deep breaths.

"I was really really hurt when he came at me," he said softly, "because he was the only person who was actually kind to me when I arrived here, a skinny runt from High School. Dagur and the others were horrible and Ozzie picked me up more than once when Dagur and Savage had beaten me up for being…well, an easy target. I trusted him…and what he did really hurt."

He paused. "But I don't wanna be that guy who holds grudge against people because they were scared or stupid or just…being an asshole for once."

"I don't have so many friends I can just throw them aside because they make a mistake. So I asked him to prove that he is genuine. I asked him to talk to Heather."

"Hiccup…" I could hear the sorrow in his voice. And the guilt.

"Everyone makes mistakes," he said softly. "Hey, I'm the expert! And I'm not gonna hold a grudge against my friend. I want to give him a second chance, Astrid. He was there for me when I lost my leg. I can't throw all that away." I nuzzled against him.
"You're a good man," I murmured, "and he doesn't deserve you. None of them do."

"You do," he murmured. And then he gave a little sigh and fell asleep, exhausted by the pain. He was warm and we had been flying hard: I just closed my eyes for a moment.

I opened my eyes: it felt later. I looked at my watch-com: it was later. Two hours later, in fact. And then I realised: we had been snuggled up between Toothless and Stormfly, who had curled around my side to keep me warm. I blinked and heard a beep: it was Hiccup's com. He moaned, stirred and opened his eyes, lifting his right wrist to peer at the display.

"It's Ozzie," he murmured. "He's emailed me some data-and he wants to see me." He looked again. "OH CRAP! The time!" He sat up abruptly and reached desperately for his leg. "My Dad is literally going to kill me! I'm supposed to be confined to the base for another day! The others will be back inside and long gone and I will be dead!" He frantically began strapping the prosthesis back on and stumbling to his feet. "Bud-we need to head home. That okay?" He turned to me but I was already up and encouraging Stormfly to her feet.

"I hope you can get in," I murmured, "because it would be really embarrassing to have to knock at the front door."

His wrist com beeped again, sounding urgent.

"HOLY CRAP! The motion monitor. Someone's there!" Hiccup gasped. "We gotta get inside!"

And he swung into the saddle, biting against the hiss of pain at his sore leg. I threw myself onto Stormfly and we accelerated into the air, following Toothless as he skimmed the ground, his rider lying almost flat on his back. I hugged my dragon, my camouflaged suit lending me more anonymity. Hiccup was flying fast and straight and I was so proud of my dragon that she was keeping pace. I saw him stab at his wrist-com and before us, a shadowed alcove in the mountain suddenly cracked and we arrowed in, through the short tunnel and back into the safety of Pen One. I heard the groan of the doors closing behind us before we even landed.

I was breathing hard and I stared at Hiccup: he looked completely exhausted-and relieved. He managed a smile and slid cautiously from the saddle, leading his dragon to the gate and unsaddling him. Then he gave the dragon a long rub and a basket of fish. I mirrored his actions, unsaddling Stormfly, rubbing her down, fussing over her fiercely and feeding her. He showed me the saddle lockers and I secured my saddle then turned to see what next.

"We gotta get back to the main complex," he said. "Ozzie has found something."

"Are you okay?" I asked him. He nodded.

"My leg's sore but I can get back to the main base. Can you check the others are all back safely? And their dragons? I wouldn't put it past the twins to go out and blow up half the local village…"

"Where will you be?"

"IT lab 2, second floor-where you found me last time," he told me slowly. "Meet me there as soon as you've checked they're okay!" I nodded and cast him a grin. I knew he would take a while to limp back to the main complex while I would be running back.

"I'll beat you there!" I promised and turned, putting my head down and lengthening my stride as I jogged off ahead. I didn't want him to have to face Ozzie alone.

oOo
Hiccup limped into the IT lab, pausing at the door and scanning the room as he tried to ease the pressure on his aching leg. The lab was one of the few places he felt comfortable-moreso than his own room, in fact. He had spent more time here than any place else in BERK and had far better memories of his time here than anywhere else. His lack of military background and the fact he was only here as the General's son had done him no favours and only his computing skills and hard work had gained him any measure of acceptance among the IT team. And Chief among them had been Ozzie. Ozzie with his outrageous choice in T-shirts. Ozzie who looked like his psychopathic twin, Dagur, but was his polar opposite. Ozzie who had mentored the scrawny and withdrawn young interloper and given him enough confidence to gain two degrees and become a Rider and leader.

Ozzie who had shattered Hiccup with his irrational attack and who the younger man still wanted to give the benefit of the doubt and a second chance.

Ozzie who was wanting to make amends.

Hiccup limped into the room and saw him at a console, three screens on as usual. Ozzie was slumped forward over the desk, his earphones on and some heavy rock track playing at excessive volume. He smiled: he had found Ozzie dozing here innumerable times and there was always the temptation to sneak up on the man and give him the shock of his life.

But as he limped closer, he saw the screen still on with a message half-typed:

HIC…ITS NOT WHAT WE THOUGHT..WE'RE LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACE…HES UNDER OUR NO…

Filled with dread, Hiccup grabbed at Ozzie and shook him sharply.

But it was already obvious from the staring eyes and motionless posture that Ozzie was dead.
I burst through the doors to IT/2 and saw Hiccup standing motionless, hyperventilating. I advanced towards him and then I saw what he was staring at in utter horror. My heart skipped a beat but then my training cut in and I raced forward, pushing past the frozen Hiccup and staring at Ozzie. I pressed my fingers against his carotid, feeling for the pulse.

"Ozzie…no…" Hiccup breathed, blinking slowly. I glanced up, seeing a colourless, horrified face with wide, green eyes that were dark and filled with shock. I tried to recall that he wasn't a soldier, wasn't a medic and wasn't a secret agent: he was a kid dragged from his High School to join this crazy project in the middle of nowhere. And he was looking at the corpse of his friend. There was nothing he had ever done to prepare him for this. Then he turned and ran, visibly shaking as he erupted out of the doors and vanished. I took a shuddering breath and moved to follow him and then I froze.

There was a pulse under my fingers: very slow but still there. After a few seconds, it repeated. I stared at the motionless body: there was no breathing but his eyes…I lifted my phone, flipped on the light and flicked it across his eyes. The pupils constricted slightly.

"Shit," I breathed then slammed my hand onto my wrist com. "MEDALERT! CARDIAC ARREST I.T. LAB TWO!"

And then I saw the darts: two small red darts buried in the opposite side of his neck. I dragged him to the floor and tilted his head back, beginning CPR. Mouth to mouth has long gone out of fashion but I had no hesitation in administering artificial respiration to Ozzie because Hiccup's words when I woke came flooding back:

"If we hadn't got you here when we did, you would have died. You stopped breathing, Astrid…"

He had stopped breathing first because Dragon's Ear is a powerful neuro-suppressant in humans. His chest rose and fell as I lifted my head. Then I began pumping his chest, knowing his extremely slow heart rate wouldn't deliver any oxygen to his brain. He could still die-he probably would-but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try. If I didn't use every skill I possessed to fight for him.

"It's very poisonous…your conscious mind was shut down. Apparently, if you'd had a much larger dose, you may not have ever woken…"

Ozzie had taken two darts: this time, the attacker wasn't taking any chances. Then I glanced up and read the message. I felt fear trickle down my throat and focussed on my work as the door slammed open and the arrest team burst in. Ragnar, Trevor and Galina all set to work and took over the arrest and I rose from my knees, watching an efficient unit performing in a textbook fashion. I turned to the message, added myself to the recipient list and sent it, then copied all his messages to Hiccup to my BERK mainframe address. But I was listening to the Team as well.

"Output?"

"Bradyocardic but palpable…just. Likely brainstem suppression. If we lose the cardiovascular centre, he may need pacing. And he's completely vasodilated-he'll need epi, stat. We need to get him to Resus One now."

"Tubed. Good air entry bilaterally. Asynchronous CPR continuing. Airway secure and safe to transfer."
"Giving one amp epi stat…in…OK, ready to move-on my mark…” And they lifted him rapidly onto a trolley the next responder had brought and ran him from the room. I half wanted to follow them but I knew Ozzie was in good hands-while Hiccup was in total shock. He needed me more. I interrogated the computer.

"Location: Commander Hiccup Haddock?"

"Pen One."

He had gone for Toothless. Shit! He was going… I reached for my com and thumbed it on.

"Astrid to Hiccup-don't do anything stupid. I'm here for you. You don't have to do this alone. I'm on my way!"

"You don't understand," the rough voice rasped through the com. It was Hiccup and he sounded completely broken. "He was there because I asked him. I put him there. It is MY FAULT."

"Unless you shot him, I don't think so. I AM ON MY WAY!"

"I'm sorry," he said and broke the connection.

"HICCUP!" I shouted then repeated the enquiry. The computer said what I feared:

"Commander Haddock is no longer in BERK."

oOo

Stoick stood grimly in the infirmary as I arrived, his cold eyes watching the action as Gothi marshalled her team to attempt to save Ozzie's life. He was trying very hard to die, system after system shutting down as the insidious Dragon's Ear poison systematically wiped out every command centre in his brain. I stood by the General, breathing hard and watching. By rights, I should have been in there, but it was too close, too painful to want to push in. Ozzie was a friend, the first person I had met from BERK who had welcomed me and made me feel like I belonged. And he was Hiccup's friend-the one who had helped him stay afloat in BERK-until the ridiculous business over Heather. I couldn't treat him like a patient any more. Gothi had met my eye and shook her head, acknowledging that this was one case I shouldn't get more involved in. The General looked down and saw my face, then very gently, laid a hand on my shoulder.

"You have done everything you could," he assured me. "You gave him a chance. They're giving him a chance."

"Hiccup found him," I told him. He stiffened and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

"He…he was in the crash where my wife died," he said suddenly, his voice gruff. It was an astonishingly personal subject to bring up with-essentially-a complete stranger. "He was found clinging to her body. He couldn't make her wake up. He was critically injured himself but he wouldn't let her go. He used to have nightmares about it. Where is he?"

"With Toothless," I told him.

"Where?" His eyes glittered at my non-answer.

"Not in BERK," I sighed. "When he found Ozzie, he ran. He looked utterly devastated. And when I spoke to him, he sounded…broken." Stoick gave a small nod, his eyes misting.
"Give him space, Lieutenant," he murmured. "I trust he will come back. You are here and I think you will find he won't let you down." I swallowed against the sudden lump in my throat.

"Sir, whoever did this is still at large," I told him.

"Spitelout has cleared all the Riders," he told me.

"This place has far more ancillary staff and support staff than Riders," I reminded him. "Sir-this person almost killed me. They probably have killed Ozzie. This can't go on." And then I sighed. "And call Heather, please? She needs the chance to say goodbye." I could see from the deteriorating indices on the monitors and the gradual slide of lights from green to amber to red that it was not going to work. We could all see the writing on the wall but the team pushed on regardless, giving a healthy young man every tiny chance of life. I heard Stoick mumbling over his com, heard the shriek in reply and turned my head to the door. I knew what would happen next.

Heather erupted through the doors, followed by Eret. She screamed as she saw her brother, surrounded by the team and she lunged at them, trying to claw her way through to him. Gothi looked up at the wild intruder and Eret grabbed her, wrapping her in his strong arms. She fought and clawed like a madwoman, but he clung on, talking to her in a low voice and my respect for him crawled up a notch: he may be a misogynistic ass but he seemed to care for her.

I left with the General, heading for his office and not wanting to intrude on the private time. He had ordered me to accompany him anyway and we walked in silence. When we entered, he sat me down, fished two cut glass whiskey glasses from his desk and pulled out a vintage single malt. He sloshed a reasonable slug in both glasses and pressed one into my hand. "Drink, Astrid," he urged me. "You've had a shock." I looked up as he sipped his calmly. I took a small sip and then coughed. I had forgotten I loathe whiskey.

"I'm fine," I spluttered, trying to get the taste from my mouth: it was like swallowing boot polish. "I'm a medic and used to emergencies…"

"But this is someone you know," he argued quietly.

"And it's someone who shouldn't be dying," I argued, my eyes glittering. "Sir-this has to end. Security here is chaotic. Stormfly has been shot. I have been shot. Ozzie has been shot. Hiccup was badly injured-tortured-during his interrogation. How-how does that happen, sir?" He stared at me and sat heavily behind his desk.

"Spitelout has assured me that security is water-tight," he growled.

"And we both know it isn't sir," I replied calmly. "They knew you were coming for Hiccup at my apartment. This is the last straw. Sir-you have to take command." He stared at me with surprised eyes.

"You think I am not?" he asked me in an ambiguous voice.

"Not in this, no," I said evenly. He scowled and I met the glare with equanimity. "Sir-I am not sure who I can trust here," I told him honestly. "Gothi, Hiccup and Ozzie were basically it. And you. But no one else. Because there is so much here that is atypical, so little adherence to protocol, so many anomalies and security breaches that are denied or deemed impossible when they have happened. There are even some of the Riders…" And I sighed and shook my head. "You alone have to lead in this. You can't trust your security forces. You cannot let this go on-or Alvin and Dagur will win."
He stared at me for a long moment and took another sip of his whiskey. Then he reached in his desk and handed me a holster with a pistol. I stared. "Your firearms rating is excellent, Lieutenant—so I am clearing you to carry this at all times. The trank darts will take down man and dragon. There are two clips: try not to use them all at once." I accepted the weapon and took a deep breath.

"Thank you, sir," I said quietly. This was starting to get horribly real: I wished I was revising back at the University now, going for a decent coffee and a muffin.

"While Hiccup is AWOL, you will be in operational charge of the Riders," he told me evenly, "but your inexperience means you cannot lead in the field. That position will be taken by Heather."

"If she is fit after her brother…" I said and sighed. By all rights, she should be on compassionate leave.

"She is military: she will cope," he said with stoic assurance. I wasn't so sure because she had seemed so off that the loss of her brother may well tip her over the edge. "And if not, Eret—though you may kick his ass if he tried to order you around."

"Won't be a problem, sir, because I am not ready to be deployed in the field yet," I explained. "I haven't done any training with the team so far so I would be a liability." He looked at me and then took another sip.

"Did you leave the base today?" he asked. I nodded honestly.

"Yes, sir," I admitted. "Hiccup took me into the valley to try higher speed flying and manœuvres. The whole team were out but he was still instructing me one on one. It was…amazing. And it was so much more real that flying around in the pens. He was very careful to ensure privacy and we got home unseen. Sir." He looked at me and cracked a small smile.

"You know he was confined to the base until tomorrow?" he asked me.

"Not until we were about to go back in, sir," I admitted. "I would not have accompanied him had I known he was disobeying a direct order."

"You wouldn't, would you?" he asked rhetorically.

"Sir, sometimes, Hiccup needs saving from himself," I sighed, "but more often, he needs reminding to be himself. I think he was far more himself when he was racing me on Toothless than he was in the base, wresting with military rigidity and his insubordinate team." Stoick smiled and drained his glass, then refilled it. He offered me a refill but I politely declined.

"Take care, Lieutenant," he said quietly. "You are right: there is a traitor here. Don't become the next victim." I shuddered. Then he raised his glass. "To Ozzie." I rose to my feet: there was nothing for it. I grimaced and took a sip.

"To Ozzie," I echoed.

Ozzie finally lost his fight and was declared dead two hours after he was found in IT/2, despite the heroic efforts of the medical team. Everyone except Gothi was weeping: Ozzie had been very popular among all the staff of BERK.

Heather's howl of grief could be heard throughout the entire floor. She refused to leave Ozzie, even when the machines had been switched off and the medical staff had withdrawn to give her space.
Eret remained steadfastly by her side throughout, for which I respected him. We all offered her our heartfelt condolences but she blanked me. I wasn't surprised but the others were: they knew I had done everything to give him a chance. Eret looked embarrassed and mouthed 'thank you' for which I was very grateful.

Hiccup remained missing and incommunicado.

oOo

The alarms roused us from sleep at 02:39. I sat up, blinking and stared at my wrist com: I was being called to the Seminar Room in full Riding Uniform for action. I blinked: this had to be a mistake.

But I did as I was ordered because I wasn't brave enough to disobey a direct order. So I raced down in my Stormfly-coloured bodysuit, my helmet clamped under my arm and my ear and wrist coms already on. My pistol was strapped to my hip as I raced in, almost the last to arrive. Heather looked down from the stage, her face pale and dark shadows under her eyes. Her silver bodysuit was spectacular and she swept her gaze across the room, her eyes lingering coolly on me for a moment longer than was comfortable.

"The Oil Refinery has been hit," she announced. "Unknown assailants are killing security and the conditions are extremely hostile. Conventional police and counter-terrorist forces can't get near safely: we're the best option. The Scottish Government has request our help."

"What's the mission?" Snotlout asked. He looked more focussed than I had previously seen him.

"Two pronged: Team One to prevent further damage and control the fires; Team Two-take out the assailants and prevent further damage and loss of life," Heather announced.

"Team One will be Snotlout, Gustav, the twins, Fishlegs and yours truly," Eret announced. "Team Two will be Heather, Cami, Dog and Astrid." I blinked.

"Erm…I'm not on active duty," I reminded them.

"We need you," Heather said coldly. "Hiccup has bailed on us-again-while Bucket and Mulch's dragons are really unsuited for the conditions in a burning Oil Refinery." I shook my head.

"I will be a liability," I reminded her.

"Are you scared?" Heather sneered.

"Yes, because I have not trained with you, I am not used to working in this group and I have been riding for about four days only," I told her calmly. I wasn't going to be baited or rise to the childish taunt. This was serious and the base had already had one fatality today.

"You are coming-and that's an order-Dragon Rider!" she snapped. I stared at her and reluctantly nodded. This was an outrageously bad idea but I had little choice. I knew she wasn't fit for duty after her bereavement but Stoick had refused to put her on medical leave and Gothi had supported him. Somehow, I had to make sure she didn't betray us all. Cami leaned close and winked.

"I'll take care of you," she promised and Ruff winked as well, but I wasn't convinced—because Heather's expression was calculating and cold and my hackles were well and truly risen. But I had to follow them as they all headed rapidly for Pen One and their dragons. I remembered the last time I was here, with Hiccup and my heart lurched: I needed him desperately now and even the pistol on my hip didn't offer anywhere near as much comfort as the sight of my auburn-haired, lanky dork
with his self-conscious smile and amazing dragon. I saddled Stormfly quickly and mounted up, then leaned into my wrist com, tabbing in the familiar ident. and whispering furiously into the com as the others prepared for take-off.

"HICCUP! I don't know if you can get this but I NEED YOU! The Oil Refinery has been attacked and we are being dispatched to get the fires under control and prevent the attackers causing more damage and loss of life. Heather is leading—and I don't trust her. I have been forced to come along and I KNOW I'm not ready. God, Hiccup—

I really need you now! HELP ME!"

We arrowed out of the doors and up, through the valley, wheeling east towards the offshore oilfield terminal and the huge refineries arrayed vulnerably at its flanks. We accelerated and there was very little chatter even though we were on our way to a mission. No one wanted to upset Heather and the air of tension was palpable. I had my helmet on securely—it felt claustrophobic—and activated night-vision, which made it a whole lot easier to see the Team and keep our place in the formation. We flew low and fast over the hills and valleys, rising higher over the mountains and then swooping lower as we headed for the coast. And we could already see the flames, rising hundreds of feet into the sky and the pall of black, acrid smoke blocking out the icy stars.

We drew closer—and found ourselves facing a scene from Hell. There were huge fires everywhere, flames roaring fiercely out of control. Petrol storage tanks were burning furiously, pipes were ruptured and nozzling flames across the concrete ground. A few figures in heat-protection suits were racing back and forth, firing bursts from machine guns, killing anyone they came across. Heather roared instructions and the fire-control team peeled away, leaving the faster dragons to take out the attackers.

"Cami, Dog—take the northern half: Astrid—you're with me in the southern sector!" she ordered and the other two swept away, leaving me with superbitch. My stomach was tight with anxiety. We swooped over the flames and spotted an attacker and he fired at us. On instinct, I ordered Stormfly and she shot a volley of spines that took out the man. Heather nodded. "Good," she said, "but can you do this?"

She swooped round and incinerated another man who was sneaking up on our left, Windshear's flames raking the man and the sounds of his screams horrifying. I swallowed.

"Erm, not really," I said quietly, banking and inspecting the perimeter. "This makes no sense, Heather. Why stick around when you know security or counter-terrorist forces are coming? What's the point?" She circled me and I could feel Stormfly starting to get edgy.

"The point is that we want your dragon and this is the perfect way to acquire her and lose you all in one go…as a terrible, tragic accident!" she announced.

And then I knew, really knew, she was trying to kill me.

"HICCUP! If you let me get killed, I SWEAR I will HAUNT you for the rest of your days!" I hissed down my wrist com as she lunged Windshear at me and I pulled Stormfly into a banked dive. I knew my inexperience was a fatal weakness as I orbited a flaming gas containment tank. I spiralled up, my dragon a tight coil as we accelerated for the sky and then dinked away from a ferocious gout of flame from the Razorwhip.

"You can't evade me forever!" she called over the com.

She was right: I couldn't. So I dived down again and almost got riddled with bullets from another terrorist. We snapped into a tail flip and Stormfly sprayed the man with spines, pinning him to a giant steel petrol tank. Petroleum spirit started to leak from the holes around and through his body,
mingling with his blood. I shuddered and slalomed through the burning tanks, holding my breath as we accelerated through a wall of flame to come almost face to face with Heather once more. I tried to climb but she spiralled me and I looped the loop to try of evade her but as I came down, I saw her arrow in on a collision course.

"Gotcha!" she said as her dragon fired.
I wrenched Stormfly to the right: I knew it wouldn't be enough to save me but I had to try something. Maybe I would only be very badly burned rather than killed. But as I closed my eyes in anticipation of the impact, a purple explosion slammed into the blast of flame and there was an shower of fire over Stormfly and I. I instinctively ducked as a pitch black silhouette whizzed between the Razorwhip and my Nadder and I felt my heart lurch with relief as the welcome whistle sliced through the air.

"Where the Hell have you been?" I shouted at him.

"Good to see you too, Milady!" came the familiar voice over the com. "Um…why is Heather trying to kill you?"

"YOU ask her!" I shouted back, pulling Stormfly into a steep banked climb above a roaring petrol fire. "I'm too busy trying not to be killed!" The Razorwhip fizzed after us, her climb very direct and aggressive and Toothless spun and accelerated after us.

"Heather-what the Hel are you doing?" Hiccup shouted at her as she flamed at me. I pushed Stormfly into a steep dive to duck under the ferocious assault and then flipped to the left, arrowing away from her. Hiccup intercepted her and hung in the air, facing her and hovering protectively between her and me.

"Ah-the wanderer returns!" she sneered. "Did you know the penalty for desertion is execution by firing squad?"

"I presume you'll be next to me, being shot for TREASON!" Hiccup retorted.

'I don't think so-because if I have any say, rather than getting you shot, I'll make sure you'll be with my brother, keeping him company," she sneered. Hiccup went very quiet and I guessed he was suddenly unsure what she meant. "And I guess Dagur will really want to make his little 'brother' scream."

"Heather, I…” he began hoarsely and I knew he was trying to frame an offer of condolence but she lurched up and swooped over him. I saw Windshear's claws swipe at him, flashing in the firelight. He screamed and I saw blood on his shoulder: she had tagged him hard.

"You're gonna make a great addition to our group once we change your mind!" she threatened him and he clutched at his shoulder, a low groan sounding over the com.


"Think again!" she scoffed as bolas whirled up at him from the ground forces. And I realised now the whole thing was a trap. I wondered how this had happened-had Heather been in contact with these men? Stormfly swung round as I leaned and I made her flame, her exceptionally hot fire vaporising the bolas before they could tangle Toothless. I dinked away as machine gun fire strafed at me and Hiccup threw Toothless into a barrel roll to avoid the bullets. I know the dragon was pretty much bulletproof-I had seen it by the loch-but he was very vulnerable because he wasn't in a flight suit. Heather circled round and flamed at him again and I snapped off a volley of spines at the gunman, then swooped round at Heather. Hiccup flipped Toothless away but he clearly didn't want to attack her: I had no such qualms.

"Hey, bitch!" I shouted and she snapped round to stare at me, her face locked in a sneer.
"Don't you get it? You can't beat me!" she scoffed. "I've been riding five years-you've had five days! Do you think you can stop me? We want your Nadder-and you are surplus to requirements!"
I smiled.

"You know your problem?" I shot back, swooped Stormily round. She eagerly made to intercept me.

"What, dragonbait?" she snapped.

"You think like a Rider!" I sneered. "You've forgotten that I'm a soldier!" And I raised my pistol and emptied four darts into her. "By the way-get away from him!" She immediately slumped in the saddle. I dumped another four into her roaring dragon and it gave suddenly gave a plaintive screech and dropped from the air. I was breathing angrily as she slid from the saddle but instantly, Hiccup dived down and Toothless caught the limp silver shape deftly. I sighed and ordered Stormfly to fetch: she obediently arrowed down and grabbed the limp Razorwhip before it could crash into one of the infernos on the Refinery. Whatever Heather had done, it hadn't been the dragon's fault.

"Remind me not to get you mad at me," Hiccup commented as he climbed with the girl.

"Better believe it, Dragon Boy," I called back, feeling Stormfly having to work hard to carry Heather's Dragon. "This is a trap. Heather and these guys are after us. They came here to capture dragons. They wanted Stormfly!" Hiccup frowned and his head snapped up as he heard and explosion.

"Snotlout-report!" Hiccup shouted over the com.

"What the Hel are you doing here…"

"Answer the fucking question, moron!" Hiccup snapped. There was an awkward pause.

"If you must ask, fire control," Snotlout huffed. "All the excitement's with your team. How did you get here?"

"I caught the bus!" Hiccup shot back, sarcastically. "Are you actually doing anything useful?"

"Where's Heather?" Eret's voice cut across the chatter and Hiccup snapped his head in the direction of the roar of his dragon, the beetle-like Rumblehorn.

"Out," he said shortly. "She had to be tranked when she went mad and tried to kill Astrid and steal her dragon."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Eret snarled. "She's just upset because her brother…"

"So upset she tried to cremate Astrid and got Windshear to slice my shoulder open?" Hiccup shot back. "I need you to take her, Eret-and her dragon. They'll need to be confined until we know exactly what is going on."

Then a scream echoed across the com chatter and Hiccup and I whipped our heads round to face the direction of the scream-and a dragon's roar.

"Cami," I breathed. Hiccup flipped Heather up onto Toothless's back and with her secure in his arms, he accelerated towards the sounds of the dragon in distress.

"Snotlout, Gustav-with me!" Hiccup shouted as I headed for Eret, who was arrowing towards the Night Fury. Hiccup dinked to his right and dropped Heather straight into his arms and I handed her
dragon to his. Then I followed Hiccup: Cami was sort of a friend and I didn't want her hurt. But as I arrived, her dragon was struggling, bound in heavy chains and being dragged down towards a truck manned by the same men who had been shooting at us. Hiccup flipped Toothless round and a powerful plasma blast slammed into the chains—but they held.

"What the…" Hiccup muttered, his head craning to inspect the devices. "Snotlout-wanna go?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Commander Useless!" the cocky voice sneered back. "Snotlout! Snotlout! Oi! Oi! Oi!" Hiccup stiffened at the insult as Hookfang flipped round and slammed a ferocious blast of flame into the chains. They shuddered but held. Gustav repeated the action with more whooping but just as little success.

"Still waiting, guys!" Cami shouted over the com, her dragon fighting against the inexorable pull of the chains. Hiccup stared at the chains, then snapped the Night Fury round at the truck.

"I wonder if the truck is as fireproof as those chains, bud?" he murmured thoughtfully and the dragon gave a little growl, then exhaled a huge plasma blast that blew the cab of the truck apart with a huge explosion. As he whisked over, another shot blasted the gearing mechanism apart and Cami soared up, the chains trailing from her dragon. She vanished up into the dark.

"Who are these guys?" Gustav asked, swooping around as Hiccup dived down to inspect the equipment.

"I can honestly say…" he began and then a man leapt from the shelter behind the shattered cab and the chatter of machine gunfire sounded. My heart was in my mouth as Toothless rolled desperately to protect his rider—and then roared in anguish. I could see the flash and spray of blood as the bullets ripped through the membrane of his wings. "TOOTHLESS!" he shouted as I swung round and slapped the back of Stormfly's head. Her super-accurate single spine shot hit the gunman straight in the back and he went down like an unstrung puppet.

"Hiccup?" I shouted.

"I-I'm okay," he reported though he sounded shaky. "But Toothless is injured." Then his voice hardened. "The situation is untenable. These men are equipped to take us down and we have no intel worth anything. Ruff, Tuff, Fish—any plan to control the fires?"

"We've got our Z-grenades which should blow the fires out…" The voice of Tuffnut filled me with no confidence.

"Or the entire facility all the way to Asgard!" Hiccup suggested dryly, his tone showing he had as little confidence as I did. "NO! Fish? Any SANE suggestions?"

"I'm currently disabling the pumps and isolating all tanks to stop feeding the fires," the Gronckle-Rider replied. "Most of them are actually pipe fires—very few of the tanks themselves are breached."

"Hurry," Hiccup urged him. "Snot, Gustav—those fire tankers. Dump them on those burning tanks. Astrid, Dog-help me sweep the perimeter. Go!" The Monstrous Nightmares grabbed the tanks of fire-repellant, ripped them open with their claws and dumped the enormous volume of foam over the burning tanks. The flames stuttered and died down. Simultaneously, the pipes that were aflame began to cough and splutter as their valves closed and the supply of fuel was cut off. Hiccup flapped down and peered at the dead men by the unbreakable chains. He tilted his head and his green eyes narrowed as he looked at their uniform: it was nothing he had ever seen. Then he led us in a tight, low swoop around the perimeter. I stole a glance at Dogsbreath Donald on his acid-
splitting Changewing dragon: his face was locked in a glare at Hiccup that made my skin crawl. It was obvious he really loathed him.

But as the fires damped down, there was no sign of the men: for whatever reason, they had fled. The facility was a mess, disabled with tens of thousands of gallons of petrol burned and enormous damage. We were down one Rider and dragon and another couple injured. Hiccup pulled back and hovered. "Enough," he announced. "Back to the base." And he flipped round and led the way.

The flight back was almost silent, Hiccup and Toothless leading the way with the rest in formation. I flew at the back, unsure of where I was supposed to slot into this unit. Eret was haranguing Hiccup over Heather and, to be fair, he never once mentioned that I had been the one to take out Heather. Instead, he quietly explained that Heather's behaviour had been off since her capture and her actions on the mission meant she had to be confined. Dogsbreath kept putting in unhelpful comments and I heard a few snide remarks about my abilities: once again, the collective amnesia seemed to have erased my objections to coming due to my lack of experience and training. I sighed and patted Stormfly: my girl had performed brilliantly, so much better than her Rider. I just hoped one day I would be able to do her justice.

We swooped through the outer doors into Pen One as the moon was setting and the exhausted dragons landed quietly, grateful for the rest. Each Rider gently unsaddled his dragon and I wearily checked my girl out and gave her a long and tender scratch before stowing my saddle. Then I looked up. Hiccup was speaking sharply to Eret, Cami and Snotlout and then he turned to search for something. His eyes alighted on me and he limped towards me purposefully, his eyes locked only on my face. I stared up at him, unable to read his expression as he reached me. He wrapped his arms tightly around me and hugged me hard and I wound my grip around him as well, feeling his head nuzzle against mine, seeking comfort and reassurance.

"Thank the gods you're safe," he murmured roughly, his breathing ragged. "I couldn't have lost you as well."

"Where were you?" I asked him quietly, looking up into his drawn face. He took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes.

"I shouldn't have run," he admitted warily, "but I saw him and I-I saw my mother…" I saw his throat work and knew he was struggling. I lifted my hands to rest on his shoulders, my eyes inspecting the horrible slash from Windshear's claws.

"I'm sorry, Hiccup," I said softly. "I know he was your friend." He looked at me with his wide green eyes, the expression painfully vulnerable and his brows dipped.

"You tried to save him, didn't you?" he guessed. I nodded. "Thanks," he whispered.

And then we became aware that the pen was silent and there were a number of sets of breathing close by. We looked up to see the Riders (except Eret, who had already left with Heather) and the dragons all staring at us. I felt a slight blush warm my cheeks but I could feel Hiccup stiffen against me as Snotlout smirked.

"Looks like Commander Useless has got a girlfriend!" he sneered. "How does that happen? Is she blind? Or lesbian? Or…"

Hiccup jerked away from me, closed the distance to Snotlout in two long paces and punched him straight in the face. Snotlout went down with a crash, landing flat on his ass and staring up in utter shock.
"'e dunched 'e!" he protested, holding his bleeding nose. Hiccup stared down on him, his fists bunched.

"You are grounded for two days," he said in a low, angry voice. "If I find you with Hookfang, you are on dragon dung duty for a fortnight! Do I make myself clear?" Snotlout's eyes rolled back in his head and he fainted. "I'll take that as a yes," he growled to the silent and shocked Riders and returned to me, gesturing chivalrously towards the door and following me out. He was limping, his shoulder was quite clearly really painful and he looked exhausted but there was a vague triumphant light in his eyes. I pulled his arm across my shoulders, inviting him to lean on me and he gratefully accepted as he we headed back towards the main base.

"Well done, Commander Dragon Boy," I murmured. "As long as you don't dare try to punch me…"

He looked into my eyes and gave a small smile.

"Um, no-I choose life," he joked. "No chance! Now let's get some rest…"

We made it back to the habitation levels, eventually, both muzzy with weariness. It wasn't unlike doing a night shift in the Emergency Department but I felt more physically weary, aching and wired. There had been too many inexplicable things, too much danger and uncertainty. I began to wonder if I was cut out for this—and then Hiccup tightened his arm on my shoulders. "Here you are, Milady," he said wearily. He had delivered me safe to my door and I smiled up in his pale face. His eyes were very dark in his exhausted face and I recalled how traumatised he had been yesterday, how utterly broken he had sounded. I opened my door and then paused as he turned to limp back to his own room.

"Where are you going?" I asked him and he frowned.

"Um, Astrid…" he said, his expression suddenly uncertain.

"You aren't running away again!" I told him and hauled him into my room. "I'm not leaving you alone after everything." I slammed the door and he suddenly looked like a rabbit in the headlights.

"I-I don't think this-this is a good idea…" he stammered, backing away. I rolled my eyes.

"Don't flatter yourself!" I teased him and grabbed his leather jacket, the shoulder torn and stained with his blood. "OFF!" Catching my severe expression, he shrugged it off and I hauled his bloodstained shirt off too, revealing a torn T-shirt also stiff with blood. "Hmm, that's nasty. It really needs stitches," I murmured, peering at the injury and he flinched.

"Please-just let me have some rest first," he begged me and I relented because I was on my last legs as well. We both knew it would have to be treated in the morning. I snatched a glance at the clock: it was almost six already but we both needed some rest. I pulled him to my bed and forced him to sit down.

"You aren't going to be alone," I decided and pushed him back and he finally gave up, collapsing back onto the pillow with a little sigh. His head was flung back and his auburn hair was messy as he tiredly closed his eyes. I hauled his boot off then unfastened his prosthesis. It hit the floor with a clunk as I shimmied out of my flight suit, leaving me in a vest top and undies. His eyes popped open and he eeped like a surprised schoolboy. I felt his body stiffen with embarrassment as I slid into the bed by him and tugged the blankets up over us both. He was very awkward and self-conscious but I snuggled against him, resting my head against his shoulder and a hand gently on his chest. I could feel him breathing rapidly.

"Um, Astrid…" he said, his voice wavering. "I-I…"
"It's been a long night after a horrible day and I got dragged on a mission I wasn't qualified for by a field commander who tried to kill me," I told him softly. "My best friend here vanished and left me alone when I really really needed him and I thought I was going to die. I absolutely want some human contact right about now-and you-dragon boy-are nominated." I stopped. "Unless you really don't want to?" I glanced up pleadingly into his wary green eyes and saw them warm at the offer of companionship and safety. Then I felt his arm move tentatively, a hand very carefully sliding down my back and coming to rest across my waist. His cheek gently pressed against my hair as I closed my eyes, feeling secure in his embrace as he shifted closer to me.

"Actually, I think I do," he murmured, his voice drowsy, "Milady."

oOo

"You failed?"

The voice was a dark growl, the powerful shape shifting slowly, menacingly. The unfortunate mission commander shuffled his feet and tried to bargain for his life. Behind him, the whole-wall screen showed the burning Refinery and the darting shapes of the Riders.

"There was another there…interference from an outside source..."

The screen blurred to display the silver shape of Heather on Windshear, attacking Astrid on Stormfly. The battle unfolded for a few moments, every motion caught by the observers deployed to see what they were up against as their colleagues tried to capture a few specimens for their master. Then the black blur zipped between the two fighting dragons and the image froze.

"THERE!" A thick finger stabbed at the image. The black shape was allowed forward a few frames to display Toothless and his Rider in all their glory. "A Night Fury!" the huge observer exulted, his deep voice suddenly covetous. "The ALPHA! Now we have game on!"

"What are your orders, sir?"

"Let Alvin chase the little Nadder-I have no need for such trifles. We need that Alpha. With that, all the dragons will be mine to command. Make preparations to penetrate BERK. I WANT THAT DRAGON..."

"And his Rider?"

"He will be mine, either of his own free will, or I will break him utterly!"
You're the leader we have

I awoke with a dead arm, a stiff neck and my pillow was gently snoring. I cracked an eye open, trying to work out where I was. Then I caught a glimpse of a sharply angled jaw, stubble and messy auburn hair and I gave a little smile. I didn't want to wake Hiccup because he had looked utterly exhausted but my arm was completely numb and I had to fidget to get some blood flowing in it. Then I felt the hand gently resting on my waist move and his eyes blearily opened.

Dazed forest green depths stared at me for a long moment-and then he recoiled and exclaimed "AARGH!" He slammed his head back against the wall with a loud thud as he tried to get away and he winced and grabbed at the back of his skull in pain.

"Good morning to you too," I grumbled, running my hands through my hair. I knew I probably looked like a tramp, with hair all over the place and probably some incredibly appealing drool at the corner of my mouth. "Way to make a gal feel attractive!" I added. He grimaced and tried to pull away, suddenly awkward and blushing scarlet.

"Sorry, Milady," he mumbled, rubbing his sore head and I tried not to laugh at his chagrin and his pain. He was very cute when he went all shy. I patted his chest gently, trying to reassure him that I was teasing him.

"Don't worry, Dragon Boy," I smirked and stiffly sat up, running my fingers though my hair again. It felt like a bird's nest. I glanced at my com: 1152. "Urgh. Nearly lunchtime-and I look like I've crashed in a gorse bush!" He slowly sat up, drawing his lanky legs up and grimacing as he pulled on the deep slash in his shoulder. He cracked his neck audibly and winced.

"I look worse," he sighed, stretching his long arms. "Gods…you realise that they'll be talking?"

"I think more about you laying out Snotlout!" I reminded him. He face-palmed.

"Oh Thor," he murmured. "What was I thinking?"

"Maybe…he deserved it?" I laughed, grabbing his hand and squeezing. "He's had it coming for ages, I think. I punched him after being here less than a week. How you lasted five years is beyond me!" He sighed.

"I needed a good reason," he admitted. "I was never enough. But you, Milady…" And he managed a small smile. I grinned back then reluctantly got up. I stretched.

"Okay-I need a shower," I admitted and he edged to the side of the bed and began strapping his leg back on.

"Yeah," he admitted and there was a pause where his expression fell. He stared at the floor for a long time, then pulled himself out of the almost-trance with a visible effort of will. "Astrid-maybe we could-could get lunch?" I looked up at his hesitant tone and grinned.

"Is that a date, Dragon Boy?" I asked and he grinned in relief at my answer as he achingly got to his feet. He limped slightly.

"That's Commander Dragon Boy to you, Lieutenant!" he smiled. "Half an hour?" I nodded.

"Definitely a date, sir!" I saluted and he walked to the door. He looked back and gave small grin before letting himself out and carefully closing the door. I stared after him for a long moment
before realising I was still in a very skimpy vest top and my undies and I blushed. Then I remembered- I only had half an hour…

oOo

"Hiccup!"

The young Rider stiffened as the sound of his father's loud voice filled the corridor and lifted his chin with a sigh. He drew his shoulders back and steeled himself for another difficult conversation.

"Yes, Dad?" he sighed. He had flown through his shower and was heading for the Mess. Unusually, he had dressed with some care, padding his lacerated shoulder with one of the dressings he had on standby for his stump and wearing a new and very ironed deep rust red shirt, clean skinny brown jeans and clean sneaker. He had shaved and washed and even attempted aftershave. He suspected he looked like a geeky High School kid on his first date but he couldn't wear a uniform he wasn't entitled to. He ran his fingers nervously through his still-damp auburn hair and turned to face his father. Stoick scowled at him.

"My office," he growled and stomped off. Hiccup sighed and walked after him, feeling as if he was following the Headmaster. He closed the door behind him as they walked in and stood uncomfortably as the General settled behind his desk. "Sit!" he commanded. Hiccup remained standing. Stoick's brows dipped in irritation at the insubordination. Then he steepled his fingers.

"You shouldn't have left," he said in a cold voice. Hiccup stared at him: of all the opening gambits, this was the last one he had anticipated.

"Really, Dad?" he protested. "Like you don't have Toothless tagged and tracked four ways from Sunday? You know exactly where we were." Stoick scowled.

"Yes-you weren't here!" he snapped. "Sitting on the north-west coast, staring at the sea is no help to us. Is no help to Astrid!"

"She could run the team with her eyes closed," Hiccup shot back. "She's far more capable than me!"

"Not on a mission!" Stoick roared at him. "She was dragged along when she wasn't ready. She couldn't disobey the order. And she was nearly killed! She needed you to be there!" He started but gritted his teeth.

"I came when I was needed!" he said evenly. "I came when she called me."

"You stopped answering coms," Stoick accused him. "Have you any idea that she may have needed you here? That she may have wanted your support? You ran out on her, boy!" The General balled his fists. "I am a fucking General, Hiccup-not a truant officer-and I have infinitely better things to do with my time that chase around a gang of moody kids who vanish off in a huff at a moment's notice!"

"I had just found the body of my best friend!" Hiccup said tonelessly.

"And you reacted like a coward!" Stoick snarled.

"I-I saw Mom…" Hiccup murmured, trembling. He took a deep breath. "I saw Mom-as I last remembered her. Her dead body at the wheel, not waking up. No matter what I tried, I couldn't help her. And I-I couldn't believe that he was…was…" He shook his head and tried to calm his breathing. "I struggled with that for years—all alone…General. You weren't there. You were never
there! You call me a coward? Well, when Mom died—YOU RAN!" Stoick glared daggers at his son and controlled his temper with a visible effort. Hiccup was stubborn, defiant and sarcastic—but he also hit the mark more often than he missed.

"SIT. DOWN!" the General shouted at him. He paused and then reluctantly took a seat, his green eyes wary.

"What more is there to say?" Hiccup asked him, his tone suddenly hopeless. "I'm not the son you wanted, Dad. I'm not the strong, brave, powerful soldier you dreamed of. I'm a coward and a loser. I'm at home on a computer, not on an assault course. I run from what frightens me. I don't follow protocol and military dictats. I do what I feel and think is right. I'm not a soldier. I'm not the leader you need."

"You're the leader we have," the General told him sternly. "So you will have to do your best." Hiccup flinched at the words: they had haunted his childhood as well.

"Hah! 'Doing your best' is for weaklings," Hiccup snapped. "Isn't that what you always told me? Success is all that matters. Strength counts. Weakness must be despised. Great parenting, Dad! Way to make your weak, isolated, vulnerable son feel wanted."

"You are the leader of the Riders and you have responsibilities now, son," Stoick snarled. "No more running. No more time wasting. No more of…all of this!" He gestured at the skinny, stiff shape facing him. "You need to buckle down and get those personnel evaluations—and the debriefing from last night."

"I am supposed to be meeting Astrid for lunch," he said tightly. "I'll do the debriefing with her after lunch," he added defeatedly, seeing that he couldn't win. Stoick met his gaze then lifted his com.

"Lieutenant Hofferson—please report to General Haddock's office immediately," he said sharply and cast his son a triumphant look.

"Way to go, Dad," Hiccup groaned. "Real smooth. I am now officially dead."

"I wanted to speak to you about last night," the General growled. "And since you were missing for half of the mission, perhaps the Lieutenant could fill me in." Hiccup grimaced and sat in silence until a knock sounded on the door. "COME!" Stoick shouted and the door opened to admit Astrid. His shoulders tightened in anxiety. "Come in, Lieutenant. I think we need to discuss last night's mission."

I glared at Hiccup who was sitting on the edge of his seat looking pale. I wasn't sure what to think: we were supposed to be eating and I was absolutely starving so, of course, we were in trouble in the General's office. I sat as requested and folded my hands on my lap. I saw Hiccup steal a glance at me and his green eyes widened: he flickered a tiny hint of a smile in appreciation. I had made an effort: decent aqua blouse, skinny jeans and sketchers with my hair braided over my shoulder. He had clearly tried as well and looked…actually pretty cool. I liked the dark rust red shirt on him but the nervous twist of his hands kind of undermined the cool effect he was aiming for.

"Lieutenant—I believe we have a problem," the General said. I stared at him.

"Just the one, sir?" I asked directly. "I can count at least four." Hiccup raised an eyebrow. He hadn't been here last time I had a talk with the General and he hadn't yet experienced the full blast of my
"Lieutenant?" The General's eyebrows dipped into his trademark scowl.

"Heather," I began, ticking the points off on my fingers. "Whoever killed Ozzie. Alvin and Dagur. The people who caused the Oil Refinery fire and tried to kill us."

"Security in this base," Hiccup chipped in.

"Five," I conceded.

"Heather?" Stoick murmured. His face was cold.

"Her behaviour has been out of character since she miraculously 'escaped'," Hiccup spoke up, taking the lead. His tone was calm though I could tell it was forced. He clearly hated his father-son chats. "I do not believe she would not be able to give us a clue where she was held. She has been more aggressive and divisive and her attempt to kill Astrid was…real."

"I tranked her, sir," I admitted. "It was the only way."

"Her helm-cam and Heather's will detail her actions," Hiccup said quietly. "And they will show the attackers tried to shoot Heather as well. They weren't working together: there were two groups. I have to assume Heather is with Dagur and Alvin because they had her captive. They must have turned her."

"I-I can't believe it," Stoick murmured. "Heather." Hiccup sighed. His head was aching from dehydration and weariness and he felt hollow.

"Believe it," he said quietly. "She was about to incinerate Astrid. Check the films, Dad." Then he rose to his feet. "The others, though, were more of an issue." He took a couple of steps forward and spun Stoick's desktop blotter, then snatched a pen in his left hand and began to draw. In a mere minute or so, he had reproduced a very accurate representation of the symbol they had worn. I rose and peered over his shoulder to look at the image.

It was a circle around a head of a dragon, its frill of spines almost like a crown, far larger and more flamboyant than those on my Nadder. It was a species that I hadn't seen—and I guessed Hiccup hadn't either. But Stoick's eyes widened and I knew he recognised the symbol. Hiccup looked up and peered over his shoulder to look at the image.

"Dad?"

"Impossible," the General said softly. "I've seen that mark before…"

"Sir?"

"I need to contact some other Agencies and collate their data," the General said quietly, his face suddenly shadowed. "You are to mention this mark to no one. No one. Do you understand?"

"Some of them will have seen it anyway!" Hiccup reminded him.

"I don't care! It is not to be mentioned in the debrief or in any report. UNDERSTAND?"

"Sir," I replied smartly.

"No," Hiccup answered honestly, "but I will do as you ask, Dad. But I need your help—and authority-access to the security pass system." Stoick suddenly stared at him, his eyes laser bright
and calculating.

"Why?" His tone was distrustful.

"I don't trust Spitelout," Hiccup explained evenly. "The man is incompetent. Ozzie was my friend. Astrid is my friend. And the invisible man appears to have shot them both. I want to interrogate the system-because I think Ozzie was onto something when he was shot. Everything-everyone-is tracked in this place. How could Spitelout not have found who was there when all the attacks took place?" Stoick stared at him and then sighed.

"Be careful, son," he advised. "There have been too many losses already." Hiccup nodded.

"One other thing," he said quietly and took a deep breath. "I want to see Heather."
Visiting Heather

Heather was in an isolation cell in Security, having been checked over by the medical team. I knew that Gothi had taken blood, hair and urine for toxicology and performed a CT and PET scan on her before they reversed the tranquilliser. Spitelout had already had a try at talking with her-and all he had learned was that Heather knew an extraordinary string of obscenities. Needless to say, Stoick had been dissatisfied with the results. So Hiccup led us unerringly to Solitary-probably, I guessed with a sinking feeling, because he had spent time in it. For someone who was so highly valued by the project, he seemed to have been very unfairly treated by the very people he was supposed to be helping. He paused before we entered the room and his green eyes met mine seriously. He looked nervous but his voice was steady.

"Whatever happens in there-no matter she says or does or you see, Astrid-stay quiet," he asked me. "I know Heather is acting strangely. I just hope she isn't going to behave how I think she will…"

He motioned to the guard and the man stepped out of the room for a moment, handing the Rider the cell keys. Hiccup walked calmly towards the cell while I hung back: I wasn't sure how well Heather would react to me. But in fact, she ignored me.

"Hello, Fishbone," she greeted Hiccup snidely. He walked unevenly forward and stared into her eyes.

"How are you feeling, Heather?" he asked neutrally.

"I'd be better if your blonde bitch hadn't tanked me!" she sneered. "Let me out!" He inspected her as she gave a pouty face and walked towards him.

"I don't think so," he said slowly, observing her expression. "I think you tried to kill both of us and letting you out would be a monumentally bad idea!"

"Hiccup…you know I was only doing what I had to," she pouted, tossing her head. "It was all her. She caused it. I never meant to harm you. I've always liked you…" I stiffened as he tilted his head and appeared to be considering her words.

"Heather, you know I can't let you out…the General…" His voice was softly apologetic.

"Then come in and join me," she whispered seductively. "You know you want to…" He paused-then nodded and let himself into the cell. He carelessly tossed the keys out to me then turned to face her.

"What do you want to say, Heather?" he asked her in a low voice. She sidled up to him, pressing her body against his. He stiffened.

"Why would you want that scrawny blonde when you can have…this?" she asked him, grinding her lithe body against his. I could see his eyes widen and I clenched my fists, shocked at my own reaction-especially when he rested a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Are you sure, Heather?" he murmured.

"I only want you, Hiccup," she purred seductively, her lips kissing at his neck and seeking his mouth. "You are the only one who can satisfy me. And I will pleasure you beyond your wildest imagination. You know you want me…"

"And what about Eret?" he asked her huskily. I could see his cheeks beginning to flush and realised
at least one of her hands was well below the equator and moving purposefully. His breathing was accelerating as well. I wondered why he wasn't just pulling away—and I felt anger start to boil in my stomach. What the hell was he doing? Bastard…

"You know, he really only loves himself," she whispered loudly enough for me to hear. "I can see you would be a much better, more generous lover." A hand raised to caress his face. "I want you," she breathed and ghosted her lips over his, her teeth nipping at his lower lip.

"What did Dagur do to you?" he asked her softly. "What did Alvin?"

"Nothing to what I'm gonna do to you," she promised, her hand moving more insistently. I heard a low groan in his throat and saw his head bow forward slightly as he fought for control. "And you're gonna love it."

"Then tell me," he breathed huskily. "Make me understand, Heather. What did they tell you? Why did they want you and Windshear?" She nuzzled against his cheek and kissed the hollow of his throat.

"Dragons are a fantastically powerful resource," she whispered, her grey eyes shining. Her voice was seductive, very persuasive. "Mobile, intelligent, unstoppable. Why should they be locked away in a mountain in the middle of nowhere and just used to serve immoral governments and self-interested business? Why shouldn't we use them for ourselves. We own them! We ride them! Only we can use them! And they should all learn to bow down to us!"

"And who controls us?" Hiccup asked in a breathless voice. He was breathing hard now and I saw a clenched fist—but his other hand moved to grip Heather's wrist and stop her. She tossed her hair and kissed his neck again, her body arched hard against his. And I realised: he hadn't kissed her.

"Alvin and my brother will be very generous to any who join them," she promised, kissing his chin and implying the attractions of the offer. He gasped quietly as she ground her body against his again.

"And the gunmen? Were they yours?" he asked softly, a hand bracing against her shoulder. His other arm was braced, clearly fighting against her attempt to continue arousing him. Her eyes flared.

"No-rivals!" she hissed. "Trying to steal our dragons! But we will crush them once we have our full complement. And a Night Fury will fit our team perfectly…"

"You've already got a Skrill," he breathed.

"Your little friend will provide speed, strike capability and control of the dragons," she promised, licking his cheek. His eyes widened and I saw his throat work in surprise. His hand tightened on her shoulder. "You will make us an irresistible force!"

"It's a tempting offer," he murmured, forcing her hand back from his body.

"Then let me make you happy," she whined. "You know I know how to excite you. Surrender to me, my love, and I'll make you a very happy man!"

"So why a Nadder? You already have one…" he murmured in her ear, giving another small groan. She looked up into his hazed eyes.

"And Nadders are the only species were have where there is a breeding pair," she giggled, grinding against him again and he gasped, almost beyond words. "Currently the only viable way to generate
new dragons, short of finding more nests. Mmm, someone's having a good time..." I saw him half-turn his head away and bite down hard on his lip. He flinched.

"Thanks, Heather," he breathed, his voice barely a groan, "that was all I needed to know!" And he shoved her back-hard-against the wall, backing away against the bars. He was almost bent double, clearly in all sorts of trouble. A hand clamped onto a bar as if it was the only thing he could use to anchor himself. I realised she had brought him to the brink so I wrenched the door open and dragged him out, slamming the door closed before she could even move. He collapsed to his knees.

"Goddamn it, you one-legged freak-I'll see you scream for this!" she snarled, suddenly raging at her thwarted plan, her affect frighteningly changing from seductive to sadistic. "You too, bitch-whore!" she added, acknowledging me for the first time. I glared at her.

"Really feeling the love," Hiccup shot back ironically, doubled up and in pain. He was still breathing hard.

"You will be when my brother gets his hands on you, loser!" she shrieked, suddenly a raging demon. "He is gonna screw you into the middle of next month! He will break you in half!" He lifted his flushed face: his pupils were dilated and eyes hazed.

"Never gonna happen," he told her. "You know I won't ever surrender to him."

"He's gonna take what he wants!" she sneered at him. "You know he will!" I saw him swallow and a flash of fear crossed his face. I wondered again just what Dagur had done to him in the past. I was sure that there was more I hadn't been told. "We all do." He closed his eyes.

"Heather-what about Ozzie?" he asked tonelessly. Suddenly she stilled and her eyes widened, the grey depths momentarily blurring with tears.

"Ozzie..." she breathed and I could see her warring, the grief of her loss breaking through whatever spell they had her under. "Ozzie..." And then her face hardened and a different person took control. "Ozzie was a traitor to his family and deserved to die." Hiccup's head snapped up at the cruel words and he painfully lurched to his feet. He turned away, his eyes seeking for me and I read self-loathing in their green depths.

"I'm sorry, Heather," he said and limped out. I followed him and I knew my face was like thunder. I slammed the door to Solitary. He looked back at me, bent forward and breathing hard.

"What the hell was that?" I snapped. He grimaced, still clearly in a lot of discomfort.

"That was Dagur," he grunted. "Exactly how he behaved."

"And you were resisting really hard, weren't you?" I snapped.

"That wasn't Heather," he said slowly, emphasising every word. I raised an eyebrow, breathing hard and still angry. "Heather was far more controlled before she went missing...but Dagur has always been very...tactile." He sighed and took a shuddering breath. "First he was just beating the crap out of me but before he left he...started imagining we had a relationship..." He winced. "He called me his 'brother' but I think he really meant 'lover' and he...wants to get his hands on me." He clenched his fists but there was a definite hint of fear in his voice.

"Hiccup...are you?" I asked him and he shook his head.

"The Heather we knew would never betray Eret-but she just dismissed him out of hand," he groaned. "She was loyal and a good soldier, at least. She wasn't especially warm or particularly
kind but she loved Ozzie. There was just a brief flash there…of the person I knew. There must be some hope there for her. We must be able to get her back."

"Hiccup?" There was something in his voice. He turned away from me and his voice was ashamed.

"She…made a pass at me, early on," he admitted quietly. "Um, I-I turned her down because I-I really don't know why she came onto a scrawny High School kid but I guessed it was some cruel joke. And because she blanked me after and she kinda laughed at me before and since I-I think I was right. I-I think it m-may have been because of D-Dagur…he-he probably asked her to…to see if I…and I saw them and Ozzie arguing…" His voice was shaking. "I knew there was-was a chance she would act like that but I-I knew I needed to talk to her…and while she was-was concentrating on me she was at least talking…" He took a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry, Astrid…"

"Hiccup…"

"Ozzie loved her and always wanted to protect her," he said shakily. "I-I have to try to get through to her and get her back. I-I owe him that! No-no matter what I have to do to save her!" He was still trembling and I finally understood. He was willing to risk everything—even being abused and humiliated—if he could repay his debt to Ozzie. I quietly walked to his side and rested a hand on his shoulder, feeling him shaking. He flinched.

"I think you got more out of her than anyone else," I said, trying to reassure him and he groaned. "I know you had to keep her talking, Hiccup. I just wished…I hadn't been here. Watching her and you…"

"I-I didn't want you hearing anything and thinking I…I…" His voice was pained. "I'm sorry, Astrid, but Ozzie…"

I squeeved a hug around his shoulders, feeling him still trembling. "I get it," I assured him. "Now go and sort yourself out, Dragon Boy—and then you have an appointment in the infirmary." He gave a weary nod.

"Guess my record on dates is now zero for two?" he sighed. I pressed a very quick kiss onto his cheek and gave a small smile.

"Next time, I'm the one in charge of the date!" I told him.

oOo

"Yer little sister failed!" Alvin's creaking voice was accusing and mildly amused, as if he expected the disappointment. "She was outflanked and 'as missed 'er scheduled com. And she's captured. Maybe she's betrayed us." Dagur paced back and forth, then kicked a chair over.

"But my plan was perfect!" he raged.

"Until the others ruined all our calculations," Alvin growled. "Yer gal performed as expected but they nearly killed 'er and our Nadder."

"My beloved sister is completely loyal to us!" Dagur protested.

"Until the depo runs out," the Arms Dealer reminded him.

"I think she'll choose her brother anyway," Dagur said quietly. "I have opened her eyes to what we can do-together, as a family. As true Berserkers! And…after all, I am the only one she has left." Alvin took a sip of his brandy and sat back in his huge chair. Dagur was more twitchy than usual,
his eyes rolling and fists clenching. Alvin refilled his glass and sloshed the decanter thoughtfully, watching the deep amber liquid flow back and forth.

"Yer don't regret it?" he asked. Dagger looked up and gave an unsettling smile.

"My brother was becoming a nuisance and sticking his nose where it wasn't wanted," he said. "He was the only one who could have broken my hold on Heather. He had to die. I never liked being a twin anyway." He gave a small laugh. "I only regret not being the one to pull the trigger and see his lifeless body fall."

Alvin stared at the man and put the decanter down, silently reminding himself never to turn his back on the crazed Rider. Any man who would order the death of his closest family was not to be trusted. He had his uses—and a very powerful dragon—but Dagur's insanity was going to prove a liability one day. His console beeped and he thumbed the screen on, grateful to pull his dark gaze away from the pacing, carrot-haired shape. The huge dark silhouette appeared, the circular crowned dragon symbol visible on the wall-sized screen behind him.

"Yer tried to break our deal, Bludvist," Alvin growled. The dark shape shifted slightly.

"I arranged the attack, Treacherous," his deep voice growled. "My men were conducting the raid. I was hardly going to allow an opportunity to acquire my own beasts pass me by!"

"And yet, we 'ad a deal," Alvin repeated. "I was going her supply yer beasts. Do I need to remind yer what 'appens to those who try ter double-cross me?" The shape began to laugh, a dark, scornful sound.

"You may frighten little street thugs and petty gangsters but you don't scare ME!" the man growled. "You never mentioned there was a Night Fury!" Alvin stared at the man.

"That dragon is not for sale," he said darkly. The shape leaned forward.

"And if I were to make a generous offer?" he snarled.

"Such as?"

"Two hundred million dollars," Bludvist said calmly. Alvin's eyes popped wide open: even an Arms Dealer could be impressed.


"What is the Rider without the dragon?" he sneered. Dagur glared at the screen and opened his mouth but Alvin raised a warning finger.

"He is…talented," he said quietly. "He has an understanding of the beasts that defies all reason."

"A Dragon Whisperer!" Bludvist growled, his eyes narrowing. Alvin watched him closely and leaned back in his chair, outwardly all relaxation and poise though he was concerned at the sudden acquisitive tone in the other man's voice.

"I presume yer didn't call me fer an exchange of pleasantries, Bludvist. Yer 'ave a plan—and yer need me 'elp!" Alvin watched the other straighten up.

"I believe you have agents within the base," Bludvist told him. Alvin nodded once. "I want to use them to get that dragon!" Alvin gave a nasty grin.
"Make yer proposition," he said. "Let's talk…"

oOo

Hiccup had reported to the infirmary as ordered about twenty minutes later, only marginally less flustered but resigned. It was clear he hated the place because he had spent time here for some appalling and traumatic injuries: I made sure I met him there and stayed with him throughout. He didn't say much, his answers subdued and almost monosyllabic and he could barely meet my eye.

I took his hand when he stripped off his shirt and Ragnar removed the dressing. I peered at the gashes—far worse than I had realised and I felt a surge of guilt for not insisting he had them treated the previous night: they must have been agonising. I felt his fingers tighten fiercely round mine as my colleague injected the local anaesthetic into the horrible jagged slashes from Windshear's claws and then cleaned the wound before putting the stitches in. Hiccup's grip tightened and I could hear the low moan he bit his teeth against. His eyes were screwed shut. Ragnar frowned as he finished the job and dressed the wound again.

"Why did you wait so long?" he asked and Hiccup stared at the floor.

"Wouldn't have come at all if Astrid hadn't made me," he said in a low voice. "It would've healed." Ragnar rolled his eyes and handed him a couple of painkillers. He didn't protest and took them as ordered.

"It will ache," he advised him. "Try not to strain it…" Hiccup shrugged and struggled back into his deep rust red shirt.

"Like when has that ever happened?" he shot back and then I squeezed his hand again. I guessed he was a terrible patient and never followed instructions.

"Let's go," I suggested and he rose abruptly, thanked Ragnar briefly and stalked out rapidly, leaving me behind. I walked after him and scowled. "Hey! Wait up!" I called at him. He paused and looked back at me: he was blushing and looked ashamed.

"Why do you even bother with me?" he asked pointedly. There was anger in his voice and I realised he was feeling very defensive. I stopped and remembered he had just lost his friend: his emotions would be all over the place.

"Because I like you," I told him honestly.

"But I saw your face as he was doing my stitches!" he told me bitterly. "It was the look I've come to know and enjoy: disappointment and disgust. With a side of pity. I don't need that, Astrid—I've had enough practice at being pitied." I stared at him, exasperated.

"Actually, you idiot, I was concentrating on Ragnar's suturing technique," I admitted. "I kinda zoned out. He does this weird double-mattress with two-oh polyglycolate that I haven't seen before and I'm really keen to see how it heals because it looks like it should give good apposition and anatomical restitution…" He frowned and narrowed his eyes. It clearly wasn't the answer he had been expecting.

"You weren't disgusted by all…this…?" He gestured to himself. I blinked at his misreading of my expression and realised his total lack of self-confidence meant he expected rejection—especially when he felt he had committed an unpardonable sin with Heather.

"What? Of course not! Seen it all before, remember?" I told him quickly and stared into his ashamed green eyes. He expected me to scorn him. "And you are pretty cute, Dragon Boy—even if
you can't see it! I don't dig those muscle-bound beefcake types! I prefer those lanky, dorky, slightly clumsy, one-legged, self-effacing, auburn Dragon Rider guys…” His lips moved into a very slight smile and the anxiety in his green eyes eased.

"Not at all picky," he murmured.

"Hiccup," I said, taking his hand and sliding my fingers between his, "I know you are feeling really awkward and embarrassed about the Heather…thing…but I can honestly say all I am seeing is a boy I really fancy, my best friend here and I want to make him smile because he looks desperately down right now." He raised my hand to his lips and ghosted a soft kiss.

"I'm not sure what I would do without you," he admitted.

"Not go to the hospital," I told him honestly. He grimaced.

"Not my favourite place," he admitted.

"Better move up the list 'coz I'm there now," I reminded him and checked my watch. It was already past three and despite the General's orders, the debriefing would wait until morning because we would never round up all the Riders now. "I need to check in with Gothi but I want you to meet me at five in the garage." I winked at him. "I have planned a date and you better not mess this one up!"
A quiet trip to the village

I spent the rest of the afternoon revising my schedule with Gothi. She explained that I would have to take account of Dragon Rider duties but that she still wanted to complete my trauma training programme and I was very grateful that she hadn't sacked me for ruining her plans. But unexpectedly—she threw a hug around me and assured me that I was her protege and she would make sure I got my skills and competences signed off as soon as possible.

By five, I was in the garage with my warm army-issue coat, a pink woolly beret, scarf and gloves and Hiccup wandered in wearing his leather jacket, the shoulder still stained darker with blood and a cross-patch of silver duck tape over the ragged gash. I stared at him. "What?" he asked defensively. "It's my only coat!" And I felt ashamed, my cheeks burning. He shrugged. "Don't get out much," he admitted. I led him to a Jeep 4x4 which I had the keys for and hopped into the driver's seat.

"Have you got a license?" I asked. He looked up and blushed as he slid into the passenger's side.

"Um…did Driver's Ed back home but never actually got a license and not a UK one so…um…no," he said, his rambling a sure sign that he was deeply embarrassed.

"So I'm the designated driver," I sighed and accelerated out of the tunnel and out into the twilight. Hiccup's hands tightened on the seat and his face went tight. "Oh, come on!" I protested. "How fast exactly does Toothless fly?"

"About 700mph top speed we've clocked," he said, "but then I'm in control! And I think if he tried, he could go supersonic…"

"And you're scared about my driving?" I repeated.

"Um…yeah," he admitted as we accelerated down the slope and skidded onto the B road that ran round the glen. I grinned.

"Chicken!" I called.

"You try driving with Ozzie and see if you are so…" he retorted and then fell silent and I felt terrible again.

"Hiccup, I'm…" I began but he shook his head.

"He was the only one who actually took me out of the base and even then it was kinda unusual," he murmured. "But he used to drive like an Indycar driver—I guess I should have been grateful it wasn't Dagur, right? So not a great passenger. Sorry." I slowed down and glanced at the clock: we would make the shops easily and the village was only a couple of miles up the road.

"I have a couple of parcels to pick up and then we are having a meal," I told him sternly. "So if you could manage not to bring on a Dragon attack or kidnapping attempt in the next couple of hours, I would be ever so grateful!" His green eyes flicked up and a small smile tilted his lips.

"How grateful?" he prompted me. I put my foot down and we lurched forward.

"Grateful enough not to drive like an F1 driver!" I grinned and he closed his eyes.

"Ohh, there are going to be two dragon attacks for that!" he promised. I made a loud clucking noise
and he laughed. I joined in, relieved that he could still raise a smile. He clearly missed Ozzie badly but he needed to talk and I was ready to listen. The village was in sight and I slowed as we pulled into the pub car park. When I killed the engine, he slid out gratefully and walked quickly round to my side, opening the door and offering me a hand. He sketched a slight bow. "Milady," he said softly and I gave an astonished smile. It was such an amazingly old-fashioned thing to do. I took his hand—which was cold—and slipped down, slamming the door behind me.

"Thank you, Dragon Boy," I smiled at him and then squeezed his hand. "But why…?" He looked self-conscious again.

"Um…you get raised by a really strict and often absent father and when he wants you to learn something you desperately try to do it because you want him to be proud," he said quickly and rubbed the back of his neck, awkward. "So…um…manners, etiquette…were all drummed in pretty hard when I was younger. Sorry." I pulled him closer.


"Bleugh! I should hope so!" he murmured and wrapped his arms around me for a very pleasant moment. Then I sighed.

"It's cold-let's get inside," I suggested reluctantly and he offered me his hand which I happily grasped and we headed into the pub.

The Queen Mary was a grey stone building, warmly lit and cosily decorated. I walked to a counter at the very right of the bar and smiled brightly. "Have you got a parcel for Hofferson, Astrid?" I asked politely. The middle-aged woman gave a smile and her warm hazel eyes twinkled as she fished under the counter and handed three packages to me. I offered my driver's license as identification and signed for them, then turned to Hiccup. He frowned. "In rural communities, Post Offices are often housed in village shops or pubs." And then I grinned. "And it means that you have less walking afterwards to go to the pub!"

"And going to the pub is important?" he asked me mildly. I grinned.

"Better believe it, Dragon Boy!" I told him in mock horror. "It is an absolute British tradition for celebrations, losses, dates, nights out, sporting events, meeting friends or just something to do. And you can double that for medics and military!" He looked uncertain. "Have you actually been to a pub before?" I asked him suspiciously. He looked offended.

"Um…twice," he told me defensively. "With Ozzie once and once with Ozzie and the other Riders…" He winced. I patted him on the arm.

"Can you order me a half of lager?" I asked him. "I'll just drop these in the car!" He nodded and hesitantly approached the bar, as if he was trying to deal with a raging Monstrous Nightmare. I dashed out to the car, clicked the door open and threw the two larger parcels in, then ripped the third open, fished out the contents and shoved them in my bag, before locking the car and racing back in. Hiccup had got the drinks in and paid and I slid beside him at the bar. I scanned the place and dragged him towards a corner table by the fire, then shed my coat and outside gear. He had shrugged off his leather jacket carefully and was inspecting his pint thoughtfully.

"You know, I have drunk some beer with Ozzie and some ale and mead with my father-proper Viking beverages—but never lager," he said, frowning. I sighed and snagged the menu on the table and scanned the list then handed it to him.
"So no cocktails?"

"No."

"Alcopops?"

"Nope. And what are they anyway?"

"You don't wanna know. Stout?"

"Huh?"

"Bitter?"

"Um, that's a beer, isn't it?"

"Good Lord—look, I went out with a guy in first year—not for long because he was a total ass, by the way—and he was into real ale. You know—beer with bits in and really poncy names? Served in pubs with sawdust on the floor, a 'genuine' atmosphere and a really really poor selection of soft drinks and snacks," I told him. He frowned, lost. "Look, my point is there are loads of types of beer and some people are really into them and others...just drink what they like. Personally, I prefer non-real ale, decent lighting and a promising menu!" And I tapped the menu in his hands. He scanned it, frowning slightly.

"You know," he sighed, "I guess I missed out on a lot of things being here. I went from being invisible in High School back in the States to being invisible and locked away in BERK in Scotland. I have about as much contact now with my Dad as I did then and a load more problems."

"And a couple more friends," I suggested. "Toothless and I. And Gobber."

"Look, my point is there are loads of types of beer and some people are really into them and others...just drink what they like. Personally, I prefer non-real ale, decent lighting and a promising menu!" And I tapped the menu in his hands. He scanned it, frowning slightly.

"Apart from the fact that she is...pretty tactile?" he said in a quiet voice. "Her personality has changed. She has become hard and ruthless. Her libido seems to have been increased. And she has completely bought Alvin's pitch and has probably been trying to recruit for him." I frowned.

"Like Dagur?" I asked him. He opened his eyes and sighed.

"Dagur has a psychopathic personality disorder with profound narcissistic and sadistic tendencies," he told me. I raised an eyebrow. "Personnel evaluations. The only perk of my job-hah!"

"Then why the Hell was the in BERK in the first place?" I asked.

"They needed people who were risk-takers because they had no idea how dragons would react," he admitted. "The psychological indices were skewed to aggression, risk-taking and self-preservation. Dagur scored high in all areas—and his adverse traits were deemed 'manageable'." He rolled his eyes. "Yeah-good call," he added sarcastically. "They really felt manageable when he was kicking the shit outta me." I blinked.

"Hiccup...no matter what they deemed 'manageable', no one should have allowed..." I began.

"He was a Rider," Hiccup said slowly. "Once he had bonded—with a really dangerous dragon, I might add—he was irreplaceable and got a free pass essentially to do what the Hel he wanted." He swallowed and almost said something more.
"And yet you disciplined Snotlout without any problem," I noted. He sighed.

"Doesn't always work," he murmured. "They don't always listen to me, remember? It was only because I decked him! Heather, though, did show a flash of the person I know. So there must be some way to reverse what they did to her. We need to chase those toxicology results because they may give us our way in."

"Or show nothing because it's days since we got back," I reminded him, hating to interrupt and burst his bubble when he seemed to be on a roll. He gave a shrug.

"That's always a risk," he admitted heavily. "But I know, because there's still some of Heather in there, that I don't believe that she was the one who killed Ozzie. So that's five people off the list. You, me, Heather, Ozzie and Gobber."

"Your Dad?" I asked. "I can't see him murdering Ozzie either." He paused and conceded.

"Six out of the whole base," he sighed. "I wanted the security access to track everyone on the base. Where they are-and where they aren't. We are all tracked at all times. Maybe someone 'vanished' around the times of the attacks? That could be as telling as finding positive result."

"Complicated," I admitted. He gave a smiled and sipped his beer. He grimaced and glared at it.

"Computer whizz?" he reminded me. "Not that I have actually managed to show you anything that may impress you so far."

"Um…wouldn't go that far," I argued, recalling his interactions with Toothless and Stormfly, his abilities to read Ancient Norse, his work ethic, his sheer determination and the amazing way he flashed in just when I needed him and saved me. "Actually, you've done a fair few impressive things, Dragon Boy!" He shrugged, not really believing me.

"Well, I believe this will identify who has been doing the attacks," he murmured. I stared at him and sighed. No matter how many times I told him I was impressed and how much I actually wanted to spend time with him, there was the nagging voice in the back of his mind from so many years of taunts and abuse that made him believe he was worthless and useless. I glanced at my bag. Well, I wasn't giving up either. This was a man who would rescue me when he could barely walk let alone fly, who flew between me and an attacker, who got me medical help when he knew the price would be jail. And I was going to prove to him that he was worth caring for. That he was worth far more than he imagined.

"Close your eyes," I asked him suddenly. He looked really suspicious, his eyes shadowed.

"Astrid, I'd really rather…" he began. I scowled.

"This is a surprise," I told him. "Please! Trust me, Hiccup." Reluctantly he complied but I checked anyway, then dived in my bag and fetched my purchases. I leaned forward and wound one round his neck. "Okay, knock yourself out!" I advised him and he looked at me suspiciously-then raised a hand to his neck where a very soft moss green and tan tartan scarf was wound and knotted loosely. A pair of leather gloves were resting by his beer. I grinned. He stared in shock.

"Erm…thanks," he said softly. "I mean…really-thanks." And then he looked up and there was the smallest amount of hope and confidence in his green gaze. His lips twitched. "But if you really
want to keep me warm…"

"Don't even think it…" I warned him with a smile. He grinned back.

"Thinking nothing!" he said hastily as our food arrived. I watched him eye his pie-I went for the Aberdeen Angus Steak and Ale pie for both of us-and he nodded as he took his first bite. He waved a hand. "…good…" he managed, trying to swallow. I grinned and started mine.

We had almost finished when the door slammed open and a large group noisily entered. I glanced up-and then groaned. It was the Riders. I watched Snotlout, the twins, Cami, Gustav and Fishlegs barrel in, talking at the top of their voices and swearing. There was a noticeable quietening of the pub and a volley of unfriendly glances in their direction: I realised they had been here before and had not done themselves-or the base-any credit. Snotlout arrogantly strode to the bar, pushed the elderly man standing quietly there aside and slammed his fist on the board.

"Six pints of Bud!" he announced and the barman gave him a sideways glance, then reluctantly started pulling pints. I kept my head down and caught Hiccup's expression. He looked pained.

"I'd have preferred a dragon attack," he said in a low voice. I nodded as-to my dismay-they occupied the table opposite us and I found myself losing my appetite. Ruff and Tuff butted heads and Gustav began whooping and egging them on. I found myself cringing: they were behaving in exactly the kind of way that I was instructed not to when representing the army. It was clear the people here knew who they were, where they came from and disliked them intensely.

"You know, you actually have a decent punch," I told him, dragging my attention away from our embarrassing comrades. He gave a slight smile.

"When I'm not doing my seven other jobs, I like to work in the shop, rebuilding engines, working with metal, upgrading my leg and Toothless's harness," he explained. "It means I'm a little stronger than I look."

"As Snotlout found out," I replied quietly. "But I think you need to learn how to fight. I can help-I'm combat trained and I do martial arts. I can maybe give you a few tips." He smirked.

"Can't wait to get your hands on all of this…" he grinned and I snorted.

"You forget, sir, that I have already had my hands on all that," I reminded him teasingly. "And it makes a very comfortable pillow." He gave a sigh.

"Alas, the story of my life," he lamented. I leaned across and punched him lightly on his uninjured shoulder.

"Eat your chips, Dragon Boy!" I ordered him jokingly. "You are far too scrawny and I prefer my pillows a little more squidgy."

"Is that even a word?" he asked me, spearing another couple of stray fries. "And I'm not sure that I wanna be described as 'squidgy'. I mean…"

"If it isn't Commander Useless!" Snotlout's loud voice cut across the entire room and I saw Hiccup flinch and freeze. "And his girlfriend!" There were jeers and whistles from the twins and Gustav. I glanced up and saw Cami looking apologetic and Fishlegs looking embarrassed. Not enough to tell the others to shut up but it made me feel slightly better.

"How's the nose, Snotlout?" I asked him dangerously. He should recall both Hiccup and I have punched him out. He scowled, then jumped up and planted his fists on our table, leaning forward
menacingly.

"I owe you both," he growled.

"No, you earned both those punches, 'Lout," Hiccup told him sternly. "I suggest you learn from it and move on." Snotlout leaned closer to him.

"I don't need to learn nothing from you!" he sneered.

"Apart from grammar," I put in.

"Do you really want Dragon Dung duty?" Hiccup asked him pointedly. The twins lurched forward and Tuff draped an arm around his shoulders. He stiffened.

"Ease up, dude!" the male twin said. "You gotta lighten up! We're off the base and off duty!"

"Never off duty," Hiccup murmured. I stared at him: that explained a lot and I thought back to his reaction to his father.

"But you are still representing the base," I reminded them evenly. "Your behaviour reflects upon us all."

"Lighten up, Astrid!" Ruff called. "You gotta let your hair down sometimes!"

"You let it down ALL the time!" I shot back. "Ruff-we're having a quiet meal here! Give us some space, hmm?" The girl stared at me and realised I was actually appealing to her better nature. She glanced at Cami, who nodded and then the female twin grabbed her brother and hauled him back to the table.

"Give 'em some room, guys," she said loudly, making a lewd gesture. I rolled my eyes.

"For the love of…" Hiccup muttered. Snotlout grabbed his beer and glared at Hiccup.

"Do you want to spend some time with your little girlfriend?" he sneered, draining Hiccup's glass and making a smooching gesture. "Does she want to know how close Dagur got to you, eh?" I stiffened and Hiccup's eyes widened. He was suddenly breathing really hard and I could see his expression: he was furious. Oblivious, Snotlout eyed Hiccup's plate and simultaneously, both Hiccup and I swung for him. He flew back across their table and landed with a crash. He gave a pathetic whine and clutched at his nose. I stared at Hiccup: he stared at me and we both burst out laughing.

"Can we make him our mascot?" I gasped, helpless.

"I don't know-I would rather make Hookfang our mascot-he's better behaved!" he commented, still chuckling.

"Maybe punching Snotlout can be 'our thing'," I sniggered and he gave a broad smile.

"Hmm, I'm not sure I can approve of that," he said, trying to frown and failing miserably. He stood. "I think maybe we should get coffee back at the base? I think the ambience has gone downhill." I stood and took his hand.

"You read my mind," I replied and nodded to Cami and Ruff. They winked and Ruff made another lewd gesture I sighed, pulled my coat on and made sure Hiccup's scarf was properly knotted before we left. We emerged into the freezing night and burst out laughing again.
"Look, I think that has to go down as a fail!" he told me. I waved my finger at him as we walked to the car.

"Not quite!" I argued. "We had nearly done when they turned up. How 'bout a partial credit?"

"Which still puts you in the lead," he huffed, opening the door for me. I got in and grinned as he slid into the other side and fastened my seatbelt.

"You just gotta try harder," I urged him and he winked.

"Challenge accepted," he said as we pulled out into the dark and began a more sedate drive up the winding road towards the base. I glanced in my rear view mirror: there was another car coming up fast on us, the headlight on main beam and dazzling me. I muttered a curse under my breath and made sure there was ample room beside us for him to overtake. But he roared up to my rear bumper and tailgated us aggressively. I checked Hiccup had his seatbelt on: I was starting to feel worried. His knuckles were white as he gripped onto the dashboard. Then he caught my expression and he lifted his com, thumbing it to emergency channel and standby. He had gone white because he knew there was nothing he could do.

"Overtake me," I murmured, slowing slightly to encourage him. But he climbed all over my rear- and then pulled alongside. I glanced over-to see a man in a uniform that looked horribly familiar from that night in the Refinery. "HANG ON!" I shouted as I floored it-just as he slammed his SUV into our side. We veered but I was able to keep us on the road-just. Hiccup grabbed his com and shouted urgently.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! We are under attack! Dark grey SUV heading towards base on the village road. They are trying to run us off the road! Repeat-Hofferson and Haddock code seven. Mayday, May…"

Then the second sideswipe hit us and we skidded sideways. I fought for control but our passenger- side wheels skidded over the edge and we lurched down the slope. I screamed and heard Hiccup screaming as well as we flipped and rolled down the slope with a crash of metal and glass.
I won't let them hurt you

"So the message cut off and you couldn't raise a response?" Spitelout leaned over the com console and the young operator-Andrus Devine-shook his head.

"The channel was open and then cut off. The carrier ident confirmed it was Commander Haddock," he reported.

"Play it again."

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! We are under attack! Dark grey SUV heading towards base on the village road. They are trying to run us off the road! Repeat-Hofferson and Haddock code seven. Mayday, May..."

"Lieutenant Hofferson and Commander Haddock were out on passes to the village-due back at 20:00. The call came in at 19:03. They are out of range of visual or sensor scans. I have checked all possible other options for locating them twice before calling you, sir." Spitelout frowned and peered at his com-now reading 19:41-before glaring at the operator.

"Any Riders on base?" he asked. The young man typed an enquiry into the security system.

"Er, Corporal Eretson, Rider Oswaldson, Rider Harrigan, Rider Bucket Pertwee, Rider Mulch Pertwee," he reported.

"And the rest?" Spitelout asked in a resigned tone. "Where is my son?"

"Sergeant Jorgensen, Specialist Tuffnut Thorsten, Specialist Ruffnut Thorsten, Rider Larsson, Officer Ingerman and Specialist Voleur are all off base without leave," Devine reported. Spitelout facepalmed.

"Leaving us without adequate cover because most of the Team have gone off to the pub," he groaned.

"Should I log this, sir?"

"NO! I will speak with them. Order them back NOW!" he groaned then scowled. "Heather is in Solitary and Bucket and Mulch are dealing with the Changewing: the damned thing has gotten out of control again. Harrigan is helping them. Get me Eret!"

"Report!" Stoick growled, erupting into the room. Spitelout looked up from where he was leaning over the console.

"Mayday from Haddock and Hofferson," he reported. "They say they've been run off the road on the way back to base."

"Prep the team-three vehicles-now!" the General ordered. "You're with me, brother."

"You ordered me to report?" Eret asked, running in.

"Rescue mission-grab a weapon, Corporal," the General growled. "Spitelout-bring your trigger happy goon squad!" He gave a savage grin. "Hiccup was correct about that, at least. You are senior Rider on base, Eret-so you're with me!" And he spun and headed for the garage. Within minutes, three military jeeps were bouncing down the track, packed with soldiers armed to the teeth with
tranquilliser guns and conventional weapons and equipped with night vision visors and active coms. Spitelout peered at his palmtop scanner.

"Ahead," he said to Stoick, who was driving and he saw the General grimace and drop his foot. Eret scanned the road and pointed.

"There!" he shouted, springing from the moving jeep at the place where the skid marks vanished down the slope, followed by three of the security team. The jeeps all cautiously perched on the edge and they trained their searchlights on the wreckage at the bottom of the twenty foot slope. Eret raced down, searching beyond the pool of light and not seeing any threats. But the four by four jeep was on its roof with the doors wrenched open. Eret peered inside, seeing the seatbelts hanging empty. The glass in the windows, though, was smashed inwards and he frowned then lifted an object: a handbag.

"Are they here?" Stoick asked, arriving, his gun raised with Spitelout at his back. The rest took the perimeter around the wreck. Eret shook his head.

"Empty-and I'm certain they didn't go of their free will," he reported. "Windows were smashed in, not out, Someone got them out of the jeep." He pointed. "Vehicle tracks, leading away…and they knew the way back to base. If they were okay, we'd find them on the road, walking back up the hill. " Stoick frowned.

"A Rumblehorn is a tracker, isn't it," he mused. Eret lifted his head up and he nodded curtly.

"I can't go after them on my own, can I, sir?" he protested gruffly.

"No, we just need the rest of the…" Stoick began and then paused. He could hear an engine on the road above and whooping. He craned his neck and peered up as the engine halted and another set of main beams angled down on them.

"Whooaaa!" Rufflut announced.

"Ultimate destruction!" Tuffnut's voice was admiring.

"Don't tell me Commander Useless and his girlfriend crashed!" Snotlout commented. "They should've hung out with us...but the great General's son thinks he's too important for us and…"

"SNOTLOUT!" Stoick bellowed.

The observers fell silent. The General scrambled up the slope, his eyes glittering and face puce with rage. "I will forget your insult to me, Sergeant," Stoick snarled at the shocked and horrified Riders, "but I won't let pass the insult you have given to your superior officers in the Riders. I think it is fairly obvious that my son is not 'Useless' and Lieutenant Hofferson is an amazingly talented soldier and doctor. They were driven off the road and kidnapped while you all were out without leave." He scowled at the truants and his huge hands closed into fists.

"I CANNOT BELIEVE I AM SAYING THIS! I AM NOT A FUCKING TRUANT OFFICER!" he roared. They all backed off a pace. "GET BACK TO BASE! Snotlout, Gustav, Cami-I want you to accompany Eret as he tracks Hiccup and Astrid. Cami-your stealth abilities and the others' firepower will essential in this mission. The rest of you-are confined to base until further notice and all of you are on dragon dung duty! Now GET BACK TO THE BASE!" He glared at them, then calmed and turned to his brother. "Spitelout-arrange recovery of the vehicle and their possessions and review security implications. How did they know our people were out there? How did they know where to ambush them?"
Spitelout stared into his face. "You're serious," he realised.

"Deadly," Stoick growled. "That's my son out there!"

I awoke slowly, my head pounding and eyes hurting. My neck and back ached. I shifted my head on the firm pillow and... a hand gently caressed my cheek.

"Shh..." Hiccup said. "You've been out for hours."

I realised I was sleeping with my head in his lap, his hand gentling my hair and stroking my face. I winced and fragments came back.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I crashed us. I should have slowed down."

"It wasn't your fault, Milady," he said with forced calmness. "We were driven off the road." I braced my hands and pushed myself up and then I saw him. His face was covered in bruises and there was blood on his mouth. He saw my expression and sighed. "You were out from the crash. I wasn't—and I may have tried to resist. I was as successful as ever." I winced and got to my knees, sitting back on my heels and raising a hand to his battered face. He shied away but I persisted and gently made contact, feeling the hot swelling under my gentle fingers.

"Oh god," I murmured. "Are you..." He gently put his hands on my shoulders.

"I'll be fine but you have to listen to me, Astrid," he said gravely. "These people are serious. They want to know about the Riders—and in particular about the Night Fury's rider." My eyes widened.

"But..." I stopped. "What have you said?" I asked quietly.

"Nothing useful," he told me tonelessly. "But I have told them that you are one of the medical staff and I work in IT. We were at the pub for a meal and they caught us on our way back. I told them I know nothing about the Riders."

"But if they...get physical?" I asked in a whisper. This was way above what I had expected. He stared into my face and leaned closer, resting his forehead against mine.

"If they ask you anything, if they try to hurt you—look at me," he told me levelly. "They will think I know something and they will start on me." His voice shook slightly and I took a shuddering breath.

"I can't watch them hurt you!" I protested. He lifted his head and stared into my eyes, his forest green gaze filled with concern.

"And I can't lose you," he whispered brokenly. "Not after Ozzie. I...I...care for you, Astrid. And I cannot watch you being tortured. I will give everything to prevent that." I hugged him tight, unable to speak. His arms tightened fiercely around me. "I won't let them hurt you if I can do anything to stop them," he promised. Then he nuzzled against me. "In the unit, there is an agreement that if we are asked about anyone, we always say it's Gunnar Gunnarson. He's a sergeant, blond, buff and brash—think Snotlout only better looking."

"I doubt Snotlout would think anyone could be better looking," I murmured softly. He kissed me gently on the cheek then leaned close to my ear.

"But I think the agent in BERK has told them about Gunnar," he murmured. "I expect they won't
believe us. So say you don't know anything. Think back to how it was when you arrived...and when
they ask you anything, look at me. If Gunnar doesn't work, I will tell them it is…Ulvang
Jorgenson-a corporal in the riders. Brown hair, medium build, rides a Night Fury. Don't contradict
me-but as a medic, you won't know the riders anyway-especially as you've only been here for two
weeks."

"Hiccup, what if they don't believe us?" I murmured. He tightened his arms around me and buried
his face in my neck for a long moment.

"I won't let them hurt you," he promised. "Just...trust me!"

oOo

Eret leaned forward on Skullcrusher, seeing the heavy dragon begin to sweep his head left and
right as the scent trail dissipated. They had followed the tyre tracks and scent trail to a sheltered
cove two miles south-west of the road where the battered dark grey SUV had been found
abandoned and there was evidence that a helicopter had been waiting. The dragons had no
difficulty in following the chopper, keeping below radar and relying on Skulkcrusher's astonishing
sense of smell.

The Rider leaned as his dragon flew in a lazy circle, tasting the air and determining the stronger
scent trail. Heavily armoured and an iridescent green and bronze, Skullcrusher was a fierce fighter
and very protective of his friends but utterly loyal to his Rider. As they circled, Eret saw the
chopper on the ground and realised the people they were tracking had changed more of transport
again. He rolled his eyes and patted the dragon reassuringly before murmuring over the coms and
swooping after the vehicle they had taken.

In truth, Eret was grateful for the distraction. He had been in turns angry, puzzled, hurt and bitter at
Heather's betrayal and had blamed Hiccup for the whole situation: if he hadn't allowed Heather to
get captured, she wouldn't have been subjected to whatever Alvin and her brother has done to alter
her. But she had changed-no matter how he had tried ignore it-and it had hurt him that she had
appeared to be using him. He loved her and was hurt by her betrayal. He had guessed there was
something wrong because her calm and controlled manner had become capricious and snide, her
constant bitchy comments so out of character that he had found it difficult to even like her at times.
So he hadn't been so shocked when Stoick had sat him down in his office and discussed his
concerns and hopes to rehabilitate Heather. But then the General had shown him the surveillance
of her interviews with Spitelout and Hiccup. He had been shocked and gutted as she dismissed him
while clearly trying to seduce Hiccup...and the other man's restraint in resisting and keeping her
talking had made Eret both angry and a little ashamed at how he had treated their leader.

It had been awkward that they were chasing after their two senior officers and trying to rescue
them. Eret had long scorned Hiccup, despite the fact that the scrawny outsider was far and away
the best Rider and trainer in the group. It had become accepted to sneer at him, ignore his
suggestions and basically treat him like dirt-yet on mission, it was painfully obvious Hiccup had
superior tactical abilities, leadership and riding skills. Somehow, the group had managed to ignore
the dichotomy and had failed to treat their leader as he had deserved. Until Astrid had arrived and
chewed them all a new one for this behaviour.

Of course, Eret was regretting calling her 'sweet-cheeks' and had to admit that insulting a senior
officer would usually land you straight in the brig: having his ass thoroughly kicked had actually
represented a result. But she hasn't borne a grudge and she had behaved professionally throughout
her time in Berk. Perhaps the pre-BERK Eret would have respected her straight off and he realised
that he needed to tap into that younger soldier once more because it was becoming obvious that no
We were led from our cell a short while later. I felt achy from the crash but very apprehensive about what we would face. I'm not a coward-I don't think-but this was totally beyond my experience and I already knew these people were ruthless and vicious. They could have killed us driving off the road and they were wearing the same uniform as the people who had shot at me at the Refinery. Hiccup had taken my hand as we got up and the feel of his fingers laced through mine was slightly reassuring, though I could feel a slight tremble through his arm. He knew what would happen, having faced Alvin and Dagur before and I had seen the results. He swallowed and offered me the ghost of a smile-less reassuring as he was ashen under his bruises and his eyes were wide and dark with anxiety.

We were led down a long white corridor and into a wide seminar room with a huge screen occupying one wall. There was a chair in the centre of the room and cameras scanned the space. A dozen armed men lined the walls. We were shoved in and Hiccup stuck close to me, his grip on my
hand firm. A uniformed man with a tanned face, slicked back dark hair and dark eyes looked at us and shuffled a couple of objects in his hand. I recognised our IDs.

"Astrid Helena Hofferson," he read, his rough voice sneering. "Lieutenant, Royal Army Medical Corps." His icy eyes inspected me and I felt a chill run down my spine. "Hiccup H. Haddock, PhD Student-IT and Software Engineering." I felt his hand tighten on mine.

"Um, my student card may be a little out of date," he admitted and the man gestured. I felt hands grasp my arms from behind and I was jerked away from him. He snapped his head round to look in shock as I struggled. "Astrid!" he said as another man walked forward and smashed a fist across his face. It was almost in slow motion—the swing of the fist, the loud crack of fist on flesh, the low exhalation as he was hit and went down, the way he curled in on himself, his arms swinging up to protect his head as he slammed into the floor. I felt a cold chill as I realised he had so much experience of physical abuse during his life that he automatically knew how to fall and land to protect himself. It was a horrifying thought that he had endured so many beatings that it was instinctive.

"Hiccup!" My cry was instinctive as well, my voice horrified at the sight. I was used to exercises, to roughhousing and combat training but this was just cruelty. They dragged him up.

"You don't speak until you are spoken to!" the interrogator snarled.

"I'll try to remember that... though it makes conversation a bit..." A second punch felled him again and he lay there, curled as small as he could manage, trying to protect his gut and chest and face. The man standing over him helped himself to a hefty kick in his back and he yelped, the impact thudding through him. Then he was hauled up again.

"Smartass, eh?" the man taunted him. Hiccup winced and nodded. "So we'll start with your girlfriend.." And he turned his gimlet stare in me. I startled. "Lieutenant Hofferson. What are you doing at BERK?" I swallowed. You're just a medic. Just a brand new, wet-behind-the-ears medic...

"I'm attached to the medical unit," I said in a wavery voice. I was angry at myself for sounding scared but we were outnumbered, unarmed, in an unknown location and at the mercy of unknowns. There was too much I didn't know and Hiccup's idea-of us assuming our ancillary roles-seemed the best option. "I-I'm taking Finals and I've been attached to Major Gothi for Trauma for my T&O elective module. I-I've only been at BERK for a couple of weeks and this was the first time I've been out of the base..." He looked at me with disgust and turned his gaze back to Hiccup, listing slightly in the grasps of his guards.

"And you?" he snapped. Hiccup licked his lips.

"Me? I work in the IT department," he said then stopped. The man walked forward and dealt him a brutal, open-handed slap. His head snapped round and I saw blood well from his lip.

"How long?"

"Two years," he admitted reluctantly.

"So you know the Riders?" The tone was cold.

"No," Hiccup said roughly, channelling his anger at how he had been treated by them. "They treat the non-Riders like shit. They never talk to us and we have no clue what they ride or what they do. And I couldn't put a name to half of them." He was slapped again and I felt my heart wrench in pity. I had to bite my cheek to not cry out or struggle because it was horrible to see.
"So you don't know the name of the Night Fury Rider?" the interrogator sneered. Hiccup glanced up and his green eyes hardened though I could see himself steeling himself.

"That would be Gunnar Gunnarson," he said.

A furious punch felled him and he was hauled up and punched again. A flurry of kicks slammed into his lean body and I gasped as he was dragged up by the hair and punched down again. He was breathing raggedly in pain and fear and I felt my eyes sting. He had been right—they knew about Gunnar. I swallowed and suddenly, the interrogator turned to me.

"So what about you?" he threatened, moving forward and fisting my hair. I gasped at the sudden pull.

"I-I don't know anyone," I said. "I-I'm not even a proper doctor yet, just a final year student…” I stared into his eyes. "I really don't know…” He slapped me hard—and again. I gasped and felt my cheek light up with heat from the blow.

Bastard...

"Leave her alone!" Hiccup grunted from the floor. "She doesn't know anything!"

"But you do, don't you, boy?" the man sneered. He motioned and Hiccup was dragged up, blood smeared on his face and his cheek already swelling with the blows.

"Even if I knew anything, I couldn't tell you," he muttered thickly. "But I just work in IT! I mean, look at me! I've got one leg, I look like a walking toothpick and I'm nobody! What would those asshole Riders want to have to do with me? And how would I know anything?" He took the blow that earned him with a pained grunt and when they released his arms, his legs buckled and dumped him onto his knees on the floor.

"Hiccup!" I gasped and shrugged free of my captor, flinging myself to his side, urgently helping him upright. He stared at me with fear for my safety and wrapped an arm around me, leaning close.

"It's okay, Astrid," he murmured thickly. His eyes were dazed and I could hear the fear in his words, feeling the tremble in his grasp. He was holding me for comfort as much as to comfort me. I tightened my grasp on him. The interrogator grabbed me and wrenched me from his grasp.

"You're still holding out on me!" he snarled and his hands tightened round my throat. Hiccup looked sick, breathing hard and blinking.

"NO!" he shouted, the anxiety in his words real. "No-you can't hurt her!" He slapped me and I whimpered, my cheek burning. I clawed at his grasp. I could have broken his wrist but with half a dozen guns trained on my head, it would be a very bad move.

"Yes, I can—it's very easy!" the interrogator snarled, his dark eyes warming with sadistic pleasure.

"No!" Hiccup begged. "Please…"

"Then tell the truth!" the man snarled. I met his eyes and tried to shake my head. He was battered and beaten and he had suffered badly to conceal what we knew. I had been forced to endure that horrific sight, of seeing someone I deeply cared for systematically abused. Now it was my turn and I was terrified that I would cry out or beg or betray something. I let my mind slip back to those stupid lists of differentials and side-effects that he had tested me on for my exams. I calmed my breathing and closed my eyes. I would endure.
"No!" Hiccup begged, staring at me. I could hear his voice breaking with emotion.

_I cannot watch you being tortured. I will give everything to prevent that._

I felt the grip on my neck tighten and I tensed for the blow…

oOo

Cami had searched the perimeter and her dragon, Swiftsoar, blended into the background as the small shape found a small air duct and easily prised it open, sliding in and crawling quickly into the network of ducts. Swiftsoar crouched over the opening, her camouflage abilities disguising her and the exit her rider would need in a hurry.

The young Rider crawled forward, flipping down her image intensifier goggles for the low light conditions and clicking her com to scan for the missing Riders. The little display swept the complex and two red dots appeared on the schematic. "I'm in," Cami murmured softly. "No motion detectors in the air ducts. And they look to lead right up to where our lovebirds are being held."

"Remember-no heroics," Eret reminded her. "This is recon only."

"Yadda yadda!" Cami mocked. "Yeah, I know. What if they're in trouble?"

"Talk to me," he advised her. "Quietly."

She sneaked forward, every sense on edge, her quick eyes memorising exits and entrances and positions of guards, constantly checking her devices to ensure that she was undetected. Her mother had instilled a sense of danger in her daughter and a love of besting others through stealth-the thrill of the chase and the conquest was infinitely more satisfying to her than anything that could be stolen. Except today, Cami knew she may need to steal her friends from whatever danger there were in and that would probably be the best thing she had ever stolen. She had felt pretty bad that Astrid and Hiccup's dinner had been ruined by the others and she did like Astrid.

"Girl power-we gotta stick together," she murmured as she slithered round a corner and found herself at a grille in a duct facing a large seminar room. And within, Hiccup and Astrid were being held by several guards. She peered more carefully: Hiccup had already been given a real pasting and Astrid was being held by the throat, her cheek bruised and swollen by blows, her azure eyes wide with fear as the man holding her raised his fist. Cami felt her fists clench in anger at the sight and was glad there was a tranquilliser gun strapped to her hip.

"Eret-we have a major problem," she murmured into her com as Hiccup jerked forward, fighting against his captors.

"NO!” he shouted. "Don't-don't hurt her!” He lifted his chin and took a defeated breath. "It's me you want. I am the Night Fury Rider."
"It's me you want. I am the Night Fury Rider."

I mentally face-palmed at Hiccup's words, the sentence betraying what we had sought to conceal. What had cost him so much pain already—and all to protect me. The interrogator stared at him for a long moment, releasing his grip on my neck and turning away.

And then he burst out laughing. They all did. Hiccup stared into the scornful faces and took a couple of quick breaths. He knew what would happen next.

The interrogator slammed his fist into his middle and followed it up with a furious blow to the face. Hiccup's lanky shape went down and sprawled, an arm moving to wrap over his face as feet crunched into his body. And then something snapped inside and I felt absolute fury overwhelm me. I had played along as a scared know-nothing medic—as Hiccup had wanted—and I knew I had been frightened because I hadn't known what to expect or how I would cope but I was so much more frightened for him that what happened to me no longer mattered. That was my friend and he had offered himself up to protect me: he had told the truth and I realised he knew they wouldn't believe him because he had already primed them not to…

Look at me! I've got one leg, I look like a walking toothpick and I'm nobody! What would those asshole Riders want to have to do with me? And how would I know anything?

He knew they would disbelieve him and make him pay for defying them. Gods, was he paying! And they were all looking at him…

I slammed my head backwards into the man restraining me and crashed my foot into the instep of the man next to him. I cracked the point of my elbow into his throat and left him choking as I sprang forward, kicking back to finish to man I had head-butted. I had looked round the room—still ten men left and all armed. Well, this was a stupid idea, I reminded myself as I spun under a swipe and spun, a kick to the crown jewels making another man less than interested in proceedings. I dived forward and threw everything into a punch that cracked across the side of the interrogator's head. As he folded, I staggered sideways as a punch glanced my head and I stumbled.

"Get off him!" I shouted as a foot crashed into my side and I staggered. I threw myself onto the man kicking Hiccup and threw him but strong arms lifted me off my feet entirely and I screamed in rage and kicked out fiercely. A satisfactory crack and a groan rewarded me as another man limped away, clutching his chest. An arm tightened across my throat and I clawed at the throat-lock, hammering my arm into the man's ribs until he dropped me. Then I heard the click and froze, feeling the cold of a metal rifle barrel rest against my temple. I barely breathed, wondering if they were going to kill me and really hoped they wouldn't.

"Quite the spitfire," the interrogator sneered, his eyes furious. There was blood on his temple and I
felt a surge of satisfaction. He nodded and I was hauled to my feet. Hiccup was dragged up as well, his head lolling and eyes unfocussed. "What happened to the scared little college girl?"

"She just saw you assholes beating up her boyfriend!" I spat, writhing against my captors. The interrogator narrowed his eyes. The man still had his gun trained on my head.

"Then who is the Night Fury Rider?" he insisted, wrenching Hiccup's head up by the hair. I winced at the damage on his pained face, the blood and bruises and despair in his bleary green eyes. There was blood in his messy auburn hair and his breathing was sounding painful. I couldn't watch him hurt any more. "He's lied to me and learned what that costs! Do you have a more honest answer for me, Miss Hofferson?"

"Look, I've only been there about two weeks and I've just picked up this really cute guy from IT," I spat. "The Riders are total assholes as he said." The interrogator slapped me and I glowered at him, my cheek stinging. It hurt less through my anger and I winced as he punched Hiccup considerably harder. But I recalled what he had said before we were brought here. I took an angry breath. "But I-I think their leader is...Jorgenson. He must be the one you're looking for!" The man glared at me and punched Hiccup once more: he sagged, unconscious.

"There-that wasn't so hard, was it?" he sneered and I bit back what I wanted to say. "Take them back to their cell," he sneered. "I'll give orders regarding their fates once I have checked in with the Boss." He jerked his head and we were dragged out. I cast one last look at Hiccup, who was being dragged along-literally, before the door closed behind us.

oOo

Cami uncurled and blinked. She had listened to the whole encounter and had been on the brink of joining in when she saw the other men closing on Astrid. She had put up a good fight and Cami had wondered why she was looking so scared-until she had realised the girl hadn't really done much active service. It was doubtful that she faced much torture during her years in University-though Cami would have considered the exams some exotic form of torture. But joining the fight would have been futile and it would be more productive to wait until they were moved and steal them away then.

But as she was about to crawl away, the interrogator turned to the screen occupying the whole wall. The blank screen turned to a shadowed image of a huge, bulky man with a cruel scarred face, long dreadlocks and flat, dead black eyes. He stared coldly out of the screen and the interrogator gave a small bow.

"Master, the prisoners are ancillary staff but they claim the lead Rider is Jorgensen," the interrogator reported. "They were more stubborn than expected." The man on the screen gave a deep chuckle.

"So you had a little fun, did you?" he scoffed. Cami frowned. "The name?"

"Jorgenson," the interrogator said with a snarl. The figure on the screen leaned forward then nodded.

"There are two in the base," he murmured. "One is definitely a rider. You have your target."

"And the prisoners?"

"Dispose of them," the shadowy man growled, turning away. "Who were they anyway?"

"Astrid Hofferson-and Hiccup Haddock," the interrogator said dismissively. But the boss started
and spun round, laying towards the camera.

"Haddock? Haddock?" he exclaimed gruffly. "Could it be... Stoick's little embarrassment? His son?" Cami froze and frowned: she hoped Eret was hearing all this because the conversation was starting to get far more worrying and convoluted than she had anticipated. Whoever was in charge of this whole mess seemed to know the General—and he really didn't like him. A dark laugh sounded from the shadowy shape and the concealed Cami felt her heart sink. This did not bode well. "Fetch him!" he commanded.

"Sir, he is unconscious," the interrogator reported. "We... um... needed to use more force than usual. They were both stubborn."

"Like father, like son," the boss growled. "Stoick wouldn't give up his pursuit of my operations either. In the end, I needed to send him a message that I don't tolerate any rivals-or enemies. I missed the boy once. I will not miss a second time. This time, Stoick can watch his boy die, slowly and painfully. FETCH HIM!"

She had heard enough. Silently, Cami crawled back through the ducts and tried to locate the Riders, her com locking onto their location. Her heart was hammering because she knew they didn't have a heap of time. She skidded round a corner and found the grille at their cell, glancing into the cell and checking they were the only ones there before knocking at the grille and hissing at them.

"ASTRID!"

I looked up at the hissed word and saw a motion in the air-con grille. The small and fidgety shape of Cami flashed a grin. "Cami?" I gasped.

"Ze one and only Camicazi!" she grinned proudly and I felt a sigh of relief. I stroked Hiccup's head, which was resting in my lap as she speedily unlatched the grille and slid into the room. "Well, couldn't let a fellow girl rider down," she explained. She looked at Hiccup and winced. "Wow—he's taken a pasting!" she added. I winced.

"Yeah," I admitted. "He insisted on keeping them concentrated in him..."

"Until you went ape-shit and kicked some bad guy butt back there!" she told me and I stiffened.

"You saw?"

"Hey, those ducts go all over," she said easily. I stared at her.

"Can we get out of here through them?" I asked and she nodded. I peered into the grille. "Um—how big are they?" I added.

"Enough room for you and me," she said seriously. "But lanky there may be more awkward." I rolled my eyes.

"Believe me, he is damned awkward anyway—especially when unconscious," I sighed heavily. She looked at the curled shape, the head cradled tenderly in my lap.

"He really collapsed outside your door?" she asked.

"In the alley outside my apartment building," I corrected her, "but he fainted in my apartment."
"Was just…resting eyes…" Hiccup murmured thickly, his hand moving against mine.

"Welcome back, Dragon Boy," I said softly, running my fingers through his wild hair. Cami's eyes popped wide open at the affectionate term. "How you feeling?"

"Never better, Milady," he muttered, raspy from pain. "You couldn't stick to the plan?"

"Neither could you!" I shot back, annoyed. "You put yourself in danger, you idiot." He cracked a bleary forest green eye and then clenched it closed as the light aggravated his pounding headache.

"Guessed they wouldn't credit all this raw Vikingness with being a rider," he sighed. I leaned forward and gave him a gentle kiss. Cami cleared her throat.

"Cute though this is, the leader of these guys knows the General and really bears him a grudge," she told us urgently. "He wants Hiccup-to make an example of him…"

"Oh gods," Hiccup groaned. "Like when has being his son ever earned me anything but trouble?"

"Can you move?" Cami asked but I shook my head. I could hear footsteps closing fast and there was no way we could feed Hiccup into the small space in time to get away..

"No time! Get in the duct!" I hissed. "No point in getting us all captured!" She met my gaze-then slid in and pulled the grille across as the door opened. My head jerked up and I could feel Hiccup stiffen against me, his hand curling tightly around my leg. His head burrowed harder into my legs and I could feel him shaking. Five guards stomped in and towered over us, their weapons levelled. One slammed the butt of a rifle into his side and he gave a groan, tensing.

"Get up and come with us," the guard snarled and I tensed but the rifles levelled at me and I froze. One leaned forward and grabbed Hiccup's arm, wrenching him off the floor. His legs pedalled and he just about got them to the floor as I leapt up.

"Get off him!" I snapped. They pointed their guns at me-one had a bruised neck and I knew we had already met. It wasn't worth chancing anything but I still threw myself at Hiccup and hugged him tightly. "Don't do anything stupid, Dragon Boy," I whispered, kissing him urgently, "because if you die, I will kill you!" He quirked a very slight, very lopsided smile.

"I'll remember that, Milady," he murmured as he was dragged from the cell. The door slammed shut and I dropped to the floor, cursing vigorously. After a moment, Cami popped her head from the duct.

"You gonna sit here cussing a blue streak or are we gonna mount a rescue?" she asked directly. I spun and crawled across to her.

"Just think who you're talking about," I reminded her. "Rescue, every time." And I vanished into the duct, slamming the grille behind me.

Heather scowled as the door opened and the latest guard wandered in, sliding her meal through the slot in the bars. She sighed and paced back and forth then hunkered down and flipped the cover off the meal.

Within was a roll, some cheese, butter, a key and a gun.

Heather lifted the gun and key and smiled. Sometimes, having a big brother with lots of friends
was a positive advantage. She calmly, made her cheese roll up, bit into it, then released the safety on the pistol and reached round to turn the key in the lock. With a smile, she took another bite, lifted the muzzle of the gun and stalked to the door…

Contrary to popular belief, crawling through ducts is less fun than it looks. My back was aching, my knees were hurting and my neck was cramped as I scrambled after Cami, who seemed to be made of rubber and scrabbled along with astonishing speed and facility. I lifted my wrist com and stabbed the transmit button on the channel Cami gave me.

"Eret?" I called.

"Lieutenant? Good to hear from you," Eret said over the channel, sounding relieved. "Is the Commander with you?" Well this was unnerving.

"Er…actually no, because he taken off to speak to the boss of whoever these people are," I reported. "They want to Night Fury Rider-and for some reason, they wouldn't believe Hiccup when he claimed it was him."

"That's a surprise," Eret said with heavy sarcasm. I bit back my response.

"We need a diversion," I told him.

"And I've got just the men for the job," he said cheerily. "Snotlout, Gustav-can you manage a diversion?"

"For my Princess-anything!" Snotlout announced and I felt nauseated. "Snotlout, Snotlout, Oi! Oi! Oi!"

"I'll keep 'em in line, Lieutenant," Eret promised. "Good hunting."

I blinked, shocked. Cami caught my expression. "He's a good guy-when he's not being an ass!" she told me and I shrugged. I would reserve judgement.

"Have you got any weapons?" I asked her. She gave a broad grin.

"I found the armoury on my way round," she told me. "Let's pick some up on they way." I nodded. "Do you really like Hiccup?" she asked in a shocked voice. I nodded again.

"Yeah," I sighed.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"But he's so…"

"Yeah-that's what I like about him." I rolled my eyes. "Girl talk later, Cami! Right now, let's rescue him before my potential boyfriend ends up dead." She caught my expression.

"This way," she said.

Hiccup was slammed into the chair in the middle of the room and his wrists were tied painfully to
the arms. The interrogator dragged his bowed head up and activated the link, the whole wall of screens clicking on to form the huge image of a massive man, his dark-complexioned face a knot of scars and dead, black eyes peering over beaked nose. A small beard nestled on his chin and his black hair was in dreadlocks. He peered at the screen and gave a low chuckle.

"Stoick's little embarrassment!" he sneered. "What shame your father must feel!"

"Not actually news," Hiccup mumbled thickly. "Who're you?" The interrogator cuffed him across the back of the head and his vision smeared with red stars.

"I know you, boy," the man sneered, his deep voice darkly menacing. "Your father has been on my tail for years. He pushed too hard-and I pushed back. I missed you before-now I finally have you."

Hiccup blinked slowly, still half-concussed. Then his brain caught up with what had been said. "M-missed me before?" The man laughed cruelly.

"Yes-the day I killed your mother."
I am Bludvist

Hiccup stared at the enormous face leering at him through the screens and frowned, his concussed brain struggling to process the words.

"My-my mother?" he murmured, shaking his head to try to clear his thoughts. "She-she died in a car wreck." The man on the screen leaned closer and roared with laughter, the dark sound echoing furiously through the room.

"And how did that wreck happen?" he sneered. "Your father was harrying my operations and I had to distract him, take him off the case. So my men ran your car off the road. I aimed to kill you both but only your mother died. No matter-it achieved the aim. He was replaced and his successor was a man with fewer morals and a blinder eye." Hiccup swallowed, anger clearing his muzziness more effectively than a gallon of coffee, a good night's sleep and a slap to the face.

"You killed my mother as a distraction?" he shouted. The man in the screen stopped laughing and his dead black eyes inspected the skinny shape like a nasty insect. "You ruined my life-as a distraction? Are you some kind of fucking psychopath?"

The interrogator cuffed his head hard and and winced but continued to glare furiously at the image on the screen. The man began to chuckle at the battered, defiant shape. "Yes, I believe that I am," he growled and narrowed his dead eyes. "But you…you hate him, don't you?"

Hiccup glared back at him, rage boiling in his chest. His expression answered more eloquently than any words.

"Join me," the man said suddenly, his low growl enticing. "Join me-and you can help me get my vengeance-and yours-on him!"

He considered it-he really did. All those years of absence, starting when his mother died, flooded back and they hurt, so much more than he would ever admit to anyone-even Gobber or Astrid. He had seen the little image of himself at his mother's funeral so many times but he could actually recall that horrible cold day, alone and utterly miserable, all but ignored by his father and broken-hearted at the loss of his mother. The image didn't show the tiny boy desperately grasping for his father's hand-only to be brushed away. It didn't show his tear-streaked face and feel the misery as he was scolded for crying-at his mother's funeral, for Odin's sake! And that was really, truly the last image there was of him and his father. Since then, there had been no presence at plays, sports events, graduations, parents' evenings…no trace at all that Stoick was his father. He knew that Stoick blamed him for Valka's death-for living when Valka had died-but now he had learned that it was all at Stoick's door.

He felt his body shaking with anger. Stoick had abandoned him after the funeral. Gobber had been much more of a father to Hiccup than Stock ever had been and the young man guessed he would not be alive now if not for his de factor father. But Gobber was on active service as well and couldn't be there all the time-and in his absence, in the care of uninterested housekeepers, there had been the bullying, the taunts, the repeated beatings…that over the years had rent him apart, broken him down until he had become the wretched joke he was today. He closed his eyes, his entire body rigid. And then there had been the worst, the time he had been just abandoned by his father and taken eventually to the home…where what they had done…still haunted his nightmares; where cutting into his own flesh offered the only crumb of solace; where he had seriously, genuinely considered ending his life. Stoick had abandoned him to that, leaving him behind like trash without a second thought…
Yes, he hated his father. And yes, the offer of vengeance was attractive…

His forest green eyes flicked up to the cruel face in the screens, the scars ugly on his dark skin. His eyes were dead, cold, emotionless: the eyes of a shark. His expression was triumphant, enjoying toying with the boy. This was the face of the sadist who had ordered his men to drive a car off the road containing a young woman and her three year old son. Who had ordered that they die. Two innocent lives—one ended, one ruined on a whim—purely to facilitate his own aggrandisement and enrichment. He had wanted to stop Stoick, who was at least investigating and chasing this monster, trying to end his evil. The monster who had murdered his wife and tried to murder his son. The monster who had caused his mother's death and the cascade of disasters that became Hiccup's life.

So Hiccup hated this man even more.

"Go fuck yourself!" he said in a level voice. The interrogator slammed his fist hard across his face and he grunted in pain, blood spraying onto his shoulder from his mouth. He lifted his face up. "I will never join you." His hair was grasped and his head dragged up, his throat bobbing as they pulled his head back past the point of pain.

"That was foolish," the scarred man growled. "I was willing to let you live but now…Stoick will have to watch his little runt die slow and painfully…" Hiccup forced a sarcastic laugh from his lips.

"Better check he'll even take the call," he gasped. "He doesn't give a fuck for me. He never has. So you may be wasting your efforts, whoever you are!" The man slammed his fist down on an unseen table, the crash reverberating through the room.

"You will learn to fear me, boy!" he roared. Hiccup eyed the enraged man and caught the edge of the mark he had drawn for his father on the wall behind the man. He seemed to be in an office but he was clearly nowhere near this prison. And he definitely had a short fuse and wasn't used to being defied.

"Kinda hard when I've no idea who you are!" he shot back painfully. "And bad luck! You won't get Stoick to even notice I'm gone!"

"I AM BLUDVIST!" the man roared, the sound echoing through the room and leaving sudden silence. Hiccup stared and his eyes widened. He had heard that name unfortunately and from what he had gleaned, he realised there was no escape from this.

"Sorry—is that a name or a medical condition?" he taunted. The man was visibly shaking in rage and Hiccup, though he felt his anger start to wane and fear begin to take over, felt a small flicker of satisfaction.

"I will contact your father, boy—and believe me, he WILL accept the call. And then he can watch as we dismember you, piece by bloody piece!" he roared, jerking his hand to his interrogator. "Prepare him!"

Cami and I made good time through the ducts, emerging by the armoury. She tranked the guard efficiently and we swiftly bundled the man up in a locker, tied and gagged. He would be out for an hour or so anyway. We both took pistols with extra clips. I would have preferred the trank guns we used in the base but we would have to use what we could—though I wasn't keen to run in all guns blazing, for fear of harming Hiccup.

We slithered back into the ducts and Cami checked her com for Hiccup's location. The guards had
been sloppy: our coms looked very much like military issue watches and they had foolishly left them on us so we could be located. Hiccup had been taken to the same room where we been taken before and I felt my stomach churn with worry, recalling what they had done to us there. Cami caught my expression and patted me on the shoulder.

"He'll be fine," she tried to reassure me but I stared at her with a frown.

"You can't say that," I told her roughly. "This is Hiccup we're talking about. The person most attractive to trouble in the known Universe! He's being targeted because of his father-again-and the poor bastard has already suffered far more than his share of shit due to that!" She looked at me in shock. I was pretty mad now.

"What do you mean?" she asked me suspiciously.

"I mean that he was pretty much abandoned by his father when he was a kid, bullied and abused at school, hauled halfway across the world to BERK with no say or choice in the matter, treated like crap by all you assholes, abused by Dagur, maimed by his Skrill and kidnapped and tortured by Alvin and Dagur!" I said, running out of breath. "I don't know why people don't just treat him at least like a human being. I mean-he's smart, funny, sarcastic, kind, patient, thoughtful and...oh damn, I hate the idea that he's in trouble again because he doesn't deserve it!"

"Wow. We really missed that," Cami murmured, inspecting me thoughtfully, then turned to her com. "Eret-a diversion would be useful. Any time this year possibly."

"Yeah, yeah-you try getting Snotlout and mini-Snotlout to do anything you order!" Eret grumbled over the com.

"Welcome to Hiccup's world," I shot back. "Snotlout-unless you want me to punch you into next week-get that bloody diversion going. I can't believe I'm saying this but-go nuts!"

"For you, Princess, anything!"

"Eurgh!" I commented. "Blow something up, already!" As unnecessary whooping sounded over the com, I rolled my eyes and winked to Cami. "Lead on, maestro," I invited her.

"Let's go and kick some ass!" Cami grinned and we scrambled towards the room, ready for action.

oOo

Eret rolled his eyes and shouted at Gustav, who was looping the loop, his Monstrous Nightmare on fire. They hadn't actually done anything yet though it was attracting attention. Eret suspected that wasn't the best idea since they had no idea about the numbers or offensive capabilities of the enemy. Not for the first time, he wished Heather-his Heather, not the skewed version that had come back-was by his side. She was steady, tactically astute and a good counterbalance to the idiocy of the others.

He threw Skullcrusher into a tight banked turn then targeted something which looked like a CCTV tower and his dragon obligingly blew it up. Finally taking the hint, Hookfang and Fanghook weighed in and blasted a generator apart. Eret winced as the battle cries of 'Snotlout! Snotlout! Oi! Oi! Oi!' and 'Fire it up!' echoed across the complex.

Klaxons began to sound and searchlights scoured the night sky for the attackers.

Eret saw guards run out, weapons raised and leaned lower over the armoured dragon. His hands tightened on the saddle as bullets began to zing through the frosty night air. "Shall we give them
something to really worry about?" he asked his dragon with a grin and Skullcrusher roared, then arrowed down at the defenders…

oOo

Hiccup had been stripped to waist and was secured to the chair by his wrists and ankles. His prosthesis had posed them a brief challenge but they had decided just to rope his left knee to the chair leg and the ropes were biting painfully into the sensitive flesh of his stump. He had tried pulling against his bonds but they were depressingly firm. And the interrogator had left then returned a few minutes later rather worryingly with a silver metal case that he had rested on a trestle table and ceremonially opened.

The fact he had then put on surgical gloves just made Hiccup even more apprehensive.

The interrogator activated the link to Bludvist and the man gave a nasty smile, inspecting the young prisoner. Hiccup felt profoundly uncomfortable under that knowing gaze, always shy about his appearance anyway after so many years of cruel taunts. He knew he was lean verging on skinny, his muscles toned from riding Toothless but his skin was marred by bruises and welts. The white scars on his wrists were visible as were the red scars across his back. He clenched his fists and lifted his chin, taking a slow breath to calm himself and try not to disgrace his father and his friends.

"Hey, guys-I'm sure we can discuss this," he suggested in a pleasant voice. The interrogator backhanded him and he grunted in pain. Then the man walked back to his case and inspected the instruments within as Bludvist narrowed his eyes at the false bravado.

"You may not want to talk to me, Stoick—but perhaps you have some final words for your son?" Bludvist sneered. Hiccup started and half of the wall-sized screen changed to an vastly inflated image of his father whose eyes widened as he was patched into the conference call. Hiccup glanced up: Stoick's face was definitely concerned.

"Wasting your time…" he muttered thickly.

"Hiccup?" the General gasped. "Bludvist, you leave him out of this! He…"

"He seems to have inherited your stubbornness and stupidity in crossing the wrong person and speaking when he should stay quiet," Bludvist growled. "Jarkan—we need a little demonstration, if you will?"

The interrogator lifted a scalpel and walked deliberately towards Hiccup, who paled and clenched his fists even tighter. He swallowed. The man lifted the scalpel and grabbed Hiccup's left wrist, then pressed it down and dug the blade into his arm, slicing the blade up in a long cut along the length of his forearm. Stoick's eyes widened in horror.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" he roared.

"Dad…no…" Hiccup grunted, feeling the blade turn in his arm. Tears of pain burned his eyes and he grimaced. Blood began to trickle from the deep slice. The man leaned close.

"Hope you never wanted to use this again," he sneered at the prisoner. "I'm gonna cut it off, piece by piece." He pulled the scalpel out, slammed the fist down against the metal arm of the chair as Hiccup cried out in shock and pain. His hand loosened a little and the man snatched it open, pressing it, splayed, against the metal arm. He pressed down with his whole weight as he laughed at Hiccup's suddenly fearful face. Then he lifted his scalpel against the little finger. "First one to
go…" he murmured and dug the blade in.

Hiccup screamed.

My blood ran cold as I heard the scream and I kicked the grille open, sliding out and raising my gun. The slimy man who had tortured us before had Hiccup strapped to a chair, a bloody scalpel digging into his hand. I didn't hesitate: I fired.

Three shots all hit the man and he flew back, blood spraying from the impacts. Two chest, one neck. He wasn't going to get up. But I was already moving, taking down another of the four guards. Cami scampered out behind me and shot a second. Bullets began to zing around us but I was rolling now, emptying my clip into the man nearest me. He went down in the hail of bullets and I rolled and reloaded as Cami tranked the last man. I looked up, checked we were clear then bounced to my feet.

"Door!" I commanded, stuffing the gun into my jeans waistband and running to Hiccup as Cami went to guard our exit. "Oh god, what have you done now?" I murmured.

"Me?" he murmured back, sounding weary. His hand and arm were bleeding badly. "I think it was him!" He jerked his head in the direction of the screen and I stared at the ugly face. I lifted my gun, then shot the camera that was patching us in. I saw his face jerk in shock and he leaned towards his console, screaming orders to whoever else was in this complex to get them to kill us. I shot the screen as well and watched it smash then die with satisfaction.

"Can't leave you for five minutes," I grumbled as I grabbed the scalpel from the dead interrogator and began to saw through the ropes. I was looking around for anything to bind his wounds with as he was freed. He was listing, his face pale. As soon as his arms were free, he gripped his bleeding hand fiercely and bent forward in pain. Once he was completely untied I found some wadding in the case and pressed it hard against the deep slice in Hiccup's hand and then I looked for his clothes.

"Astrid…" he murmured, his voice wavering. I snatched his shirt and helped him on with it, pulling up the sleeve and binding the scarf tightly round his sliced arm. I sighed: blood was a pain to get out.

"I'm not leaving without you so don't even think it," I said tightly.

"I wasn't. Thank you," he said in a genuinely relieved voice. "I really need to get outta here-NOW! He will send every man he has after us!" I glanced at Cami and she nodded, so we ran for the corridor-and I grabbed Hiccup as I realised he was struggling to keep up. He was leaning on me, staggering as we headed for the main door. Until we heard the sound of running feet and the crack of automatic weapons being cocked. I stiffened and we shrank back into a recess.

"Any other routes?" I asked as an explosion sounded outside. The lights flickered and dimmed.

"Way I came in," Cami suggested. I glanced up at Hiccup.

"How do you fancy crawling through ducts?" I asked him. He grimaced.

"If it doesn't mean more people hitting me or trying to cut bits off, then it's fine with me," he said wearily. We drew back into an alcove and I covered the corridor as Cami wrestled the grille open and scampered in. Hiccup dropped to his knees and awkwardly scrambled in. As soon as he was vanished, I dived after them, hauling the grille closed. We began to move along-and then the lights
went out.

Another explosion rocked the complex.


"What in the name of Loki…" he muttered. I sighed as Cami activated a mini LED light and crawled on.

"The General sent us when he found your car," she explained continuing on. "Eret, Snot and mini-Snot are causing some mayhem as a diversion."

"At least we're getting them to do something they can manage," Hiccup said roughly, crawling slowly. He couldn't put any weight on his left arm and wasn't fitting well in the cramped space. His long legs were the problem and he was clearly struggling with his wounds from the beating. The explosions got closer.

"Swiftsoar?" Cami hissed and the dragon gave a little croaking noise and then rumbled deeply. She frowned, then sped up and I nearly ran into Hiccup as he paused ahead of me.

"She doesn't sound happy," he said worriedly.

"No, I think that's Cami's happy voice," I murmured.

"Swiftsoar," he said slowly. "Go first-I'm unarmed." I gaped but he pressed himself against the side of the duct and I managed to slide past him, our bodies almost sliding over one another. I paused and laid a hand on his face, visible in the dim light from the coms.

"Stay behind me, Dragon Boy," I said softly. "I don't want you hurt." I felt his face move into a slight smile under my touch.

"More,' he murmured. "Me neither." I slid forward-and then I heard Cami arguing very loudly with unknowns, her weapon tossed behind her-within reach and under the cover of the cowering dragon. I grasped it and lifted my com.

"Eret, Snotlout, Gustav-Cami is in trouble!" I hissed. "Get 'em!" I heard roars outside and Hiccup pressed against me. His hand found mine.

"Hang back," he advised. "They won't hold back!" And the roars grew louder, accompanied by the roar and explosion of a wall of flame hitting the ground. There were screams and cries and the furious growl of a dragon quite close by. I saw the grille open up ahead on me as Cami's dragon moved away and I erupted out, seeing a man aiming at Cami. Her dragon was trying to wrap her wings around her but I suddenly had the vision of the bullets ripping through Toothless's wings in the Refinery.

They have armour piercing bullets!

And as I was thinking, I was also moving with purpose. I trunked him before I emptied the clip of my pistol in the direction of more shouts that seemed to be approaching at a run. Hiccup achingly scrambled out of the duct, his green eyes scanning the locale urgently, and then he launched at me, bearing me to the ground as bullets stitched the wall above my head. I gazed up as he lay across me, his green eyes staring deeply into my own.

"No point rescuing me if I lose you," he told me roughly, not moving as another explosion sounded from the direction of the gunman-along with shouts and whooping.
"WHOO! FIRE IT UP!"

"That's a stupid battle cry!"

"Yeah-but it's mine!"

"Snotlout! Snotlout…"

"My thoughts exactly," I murmured as he leaned forward and his lips hesitantly met mine. I closed my eyes and raised my hands to grasp his head, leaning into the kiss.

"Ah-hem!" Eret's voice was loud enough to remind us that this wasn't the best place to eat each other's face. "Get a room-back at base, preferably!" Reluctantly, Hiccup pulled away and I scrambled up, thrusting my hand out to help him up. Cami was already on her dragon and she winked at me.

"Wanna ride, sister?" she invited. I glanced at Hiccup but Eret had already landed and had offered his hand to the injured man. Hiccup sighed and allowed himself to be pulled up behind the Rumblehorn rider. I jumped up behind Cami and the dragons shot up as Gustav and Snotlout mounted one last devastating strafing run that left half the complex in flames and in darkness.

"Snotlout! Snotlout! Oi! Oi! Oi!"

"Is he going to do this all the way back?" I asked Hiccup over the com.

"Probably," he muttered. He sounded desperately weary. I hung tight to Cami and she drifted her dragon closer to Eret's so I could see him. He ghosted a smile just visible in the moonlight. "Thanks for the save, Astrid. I really mean it."

"What was he doing?" I asked, worried by the detachment in his voice. Something really bad had happened, something he didn't want anyone to hear…well, except me. He paused.

"We can talk later," he said quickly, changing the subject. "I think I owe you coffee." I facepalmed.

"Oh no," I groaned. "I think this date has to definitely count as a fail." I heard a small chuckle from his end of the com.

"Better luck next time," he smirked.

"What makes you think there will BE a next time?" I teased him.

"Hmm. Thought I was your boyfriend?" I groaned: he had remarkable recall for someone who had just been beaten to a pulp at the time.

"You heard that?"

"May have been the concussion speaking but I was sure you called me your boyfriend as you kicked their asses!"

"I'll kick yours if you mention that again!" I shot back.

"You wouldn't kick a one-legged…" he began then caught my expression. " Shutting up," he finished hastily with a more genuine smile.

"I could use that coffee right about now," I groaned as Snotlout and Gustav continued arguing…
The door to the General's office swung silently open and a slender, jet-haired figure slid in. There was a bulky shape just visible in the chair, the lights not on and a single cut-glass whisky tumbler half-filled with amber liquid set on the blotter, reflecting the light entering through the door. The chair was turned away from the door and gentle snores filled the air.

Heather lifted her pistol and emptied the entire clip into the man's back before racing for the dragon pens.
Buying Time

I was utterly exhausted as we finally descended towards BERK. It was freezing, it had been a horrendously long night and I had never flown so far. I had aches where I had forgotten I had muscles (I clearly knew I had muscles there as I got a Distinction in Anatomy…) How Hiccup was feeling, God only knew. He had endured an even busier night than I had.

As we circled for final approach, I noticed we weren't coming round the glen and heading towards the external entrance to Pen One and I tapped Cami's shoulder. "What's going on?" I shouted. "We're coming in along the road!"

"We've been ordered to land in the Main Garage!" she shouted back. I blinked and then realised they had proper riding coms-earpieces-as well as our standard wrist-coms. And something was already telling me this wasn't good. I cast a glance at Hiccup but he was shouting at Eret and the corporal wasn't giving any answers either. Unconsciously, my grip tightened on Cami as we swooped down towards the huge double doors of the Garage. "Ow, Astrid! Way to snap me in two!"

"Sorry…" I mumbled as we swooped in, backwinged and landed by Gustav. I leapt off and ran to Hiccup, making sure he landed safely. His hand tightened on my shoulder as he steadied himself before turning to the main base. And then he stiffened: Gobber and Spitelout were standing there, both looking grim. Hiccup limped forward urgently.

"What's happened?" he asked directly, his voice breathless. He looked like crap, to be honest, and how he was standing was a bit of an achievement but he was focussed as a laser. He knew both men and could read their faces. "Dad?" he breathed and his face fell. He looked as if he had been winded. "No…"

"I'm sorry, Commander," Spitelout announced as the other Riders walked up. "General Stoick Haddock was shot by Heather an hour ago. She has taken off on Windshear and has taken the Snowraith as well. The General…didn't make it…"

"No!" Hiccup breathed, his legs buckling. I caught him but he was a dead weight. He was shaking all over. "No…" he repeated, his voice broken. "No…" I wrapped my arms around him as Snotlout ran up. His eyes searched his father's face and he paled.

"Dad…you aren't serious…?" he asked but Spitelout scowled at him. Blinking, shocked, he looked at Hiccup but he was wrapped around me, his head buried in my shoulder. He kept shaking his head slightly and whimpering 'No,' as if saying it enough times would make it true. My heart was breaking for him as I felt grief consume him and my arms tightened on his body.

"Sir…" I began but Hiccup lifted his head suddenly.

"I want to see him," he said abruptly. Gobber sighed.

"We thought yer would, laddie," he said in a sympathetic voice. He caught my eye and nodded. "Yer too, lassie. I think he'll need yer support." I nodded.

"The rest of you-to your rooms. Base is in lockdown," Spitelout announced. "All personnel should leave their rooms only when contacted and their passes activated to permit passage through security doors. All security doors will be closed otherwise. All Pens will be restricted. And the future of BERK itself is in grave doubt."
Hiccup was walking as if in a daze, his right hand closed around mine, the scarf wrapped round his left arm soaked with blood from his wounds. He looked as if he was going to cry and honestly, I didn't blame him. How could this happen? How-how could base security be so lax that a hostile could get hold of a weapon, walk through security and murder the commanding officer? I cast Spitelout a look that probably amounted to insubordination because it held utter contempt. Then I turned my attention back to Hiccup and wondered how the hell I could help him through this.

And then I knew: I was the only one who could—because I had already been through this. I had lost everyone who meant anything to me: Gran, both my parents. I never got to say goodbye to anyone, never got to prepare myself for such devastating losses. But I had found the strength to go on. I would make sure I lent it to him to keep him going. I couldn't fail him now when he needed me as never before.

Gobber led us to the General's office and paused, then ushered us in. Hiccup swallowed and his face lost what colour it had left, before walking forward. Spitelout closed and locked the door behind us as we stared at the back of the General's chair, fourteen ragged holes facing us. Hiccup stared and his eyes widened for a long moment.

"Dad…no…" he breathed. "I'm so sorry. I-I should have been here…" His hand tightened on mine and I could hear his breaths growing ragged with utter desolation.

"I don't think you had much choice, son."

Hiccup froze, his eyes wide and face utterly shocked. I turned to the voice and saw the General standing in the doorway to the adjacent room—his suite of living quarters—his arms folded and face calm. His son swallowed and stared at the chair once more.

"D-dad?" he breathed. Stoick raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't think I'd be so incompetent to be shot in my own office, did you?" he demanded. My expression spoke volumes but Hiccup was still staring at the chair.

"How?" I asked, losing all military protocol. My mind was reeling and I was honestly so confused I didn't know what the hell was going on.

"I wear Kevlar every day and my chair is also shielded just under the leather," he growled. "When Heather escaped from custody—as we were sure she would, considering there is at least one other traitor in the base—we activated the plan to follow her. The pens with your dragons were deadlocked and all major offices were closed. Spitelout, Gobber and the infirmary were all secured. I was the obvious target so I made myself a convenient one: asleep in the dark, back to the intruder. She took the bait."

"You wear Kevlar all the time?" I asked.

"My career has made a legion of enemies—one reason why I didn't want to leave Hiccup exposed when I vanished," he explained. "I have so far had three dozen attempts on my life. BERK was a perfect place for me to spend the remainder of my career. But it was obvious Heather was going to be a problem. So her dragon was tagged—twice—and we injected her with a tracker as well." I frowned.

"Isn't that unethical?" I asked. My Hypocratic oath—which I technically had yet to take, if I ever passed Finals—was kicking me with a few guilty pangs, though not as many as I had expected.
"So are murder and treason," Spitelout growled but the General raised a huge paw to silence him.

"Won't she notice?" I added, more pragmatically.

"Have yer been tranquillised, lassie?" Gobber asked. I shook my head. "Kicks yer like a mule. Yer may have seen Hiccup after he was taken down for bringing Toothless out of containment. He was covered in circular weals from each shot…perfect place to inject a tracker. The swelling and pain will conceal the device perfectly…" I stole a glance at him: he was stiff, breathing hard and still staring at the chair. I recalled the bruises on his chest after I came out of the infirmary: now I understood.

"Except we didn't expect you to be kidnapped and the Riders missing when it all went down," Spitelout added. "Heather is definitely working for her brother and Alvin but you were kidnapped by Bludvist."

"Unless they are working together," I murmured.

"The two attacks were not complimentary," Stoick said gruffly. "Bludvist always plans ruthlessly and efficiently. It is very clear he has had the village under surveillance for some time. But this action took few dragons. If the attacks had been coordinated, they would have known Hiccup rode the Night Fury and would have identified him and taken Toothless straight away. No, they worked against each other tonight-and that made our job easier."

"Sir-you know you can't stay dead," I told him, frowning. In a contained environment like this, word would get out-it always does.

"Which is why I have bought you-and us-a window," the General said calmly. "Use it. Do your thing, son-and use that security access I granted to find the traitor as you planned and weed them out. And we will plan our attack because Heather will lead us direct to Dagur and Alvin."

"You let me think you were dead," Hiccup said softly.

"I'm sorry, son," Stoick began, "but I…"

"YOU let me think you were FUCKING DEAD?" Hiccup screamed, turned to face him and swaying in exhaustion. I stared at him. His eyes were blazing with rage and hurt and he looked furious. "Have you even the TINIEST clue how awful that was for me? How much I suffered after Mom's death with your abandonment and all the shit I had to endure? Have you any idea what Bludvist said to me this evening, how much pain he dragged up…how much I hated you because of what he said? And then hearing you had been killed…how much GUILT I have been wrestling with?"

"I couldn't let you into the plan…we needed your honest reaction…" Spitelout interrupted.

"SHUT UP!" Hiccup snarled at him. "Your incompetence let Ozzie die. Don't tell me that was part of your master fucking plan! Because if you were any fucking good, you would have found the traitor months ago and I wouldn't have had to take Toothless away or go through everything Dagur put me through when he tortured me…" His eyes were shimmering and he turned his blazing emerald glare on the shape of his supposedly-dead father. He was visibly shaking, his fists balled.

"I lost Mom when I was small and I only ever really had one parent. I recall almost nothing of her, Dad-and you never told me anything about her to keep her memory alive. You never did anything, period. But though you were the worst parent ever but I still loved you…and hearing you were dead…feeling so guilty that I had always disappointed you and your last sight of me was me being
tortured by Bludvist's men when I should have been at your side, defending you...made me feel so weak and useless and worthless and every single damned insult you have ever snarled at me..." He dropped to his knees, huge sobbing breaths shaking him. I ran forward and wrapped my arms around him—and he struggled against me for a moment before realising that it was me. And then he just clung to me and cried.

"You have to see this was for the greater good..." Stoick began but as the broken sobs sounded, I looked up at him with a venomous glare.

"Sir, while I can understand what you say intellectually-did you for one tiny second consider what this would do to your son?" I asked sharply. He opened his mouth and then he paused. "I thought not," I snapped. "Do you even recall you have a son, sir? Do you even care what he's suffered when you weren't there? Or was your glittering career everything and your interest in family ended the day your wife died?"

Honestly, I must have had a concussion because this was way beyond even the most free-speaking outburst I had ever had. But all I could feel was Hiccup's grief and I was furious.

"Lieutenant, you have no right..." he growled.

"No, sir-you have no right to speak to me or him like this!" I snarled at him. "At least I care for him. I knew the moment you met us in the garage how terribly this would hit him. The damage it would do. Did you think he'd just smile and nod and go 'hey, Dad. That's okay. No problem.'? I know what it's like to lose parents early and suddenly and I don't think you even considered the wreckage this would leave." I rested my head on Hiccup's for a second. "We need to get to the infirmary," I said tightly, so angry I was unable to continue. "Gobber-could you help me? He's pretty badly hurt and he needs his cuts suturing urgently."

"Aye, lassie," the big man said and helped me haul Hiccup to his feet. He wouldn't look at his father or Spitelout, his head down and still shaking violently. I made sure his arm was over my shoulder and his body pressed hard against mine. I could feel his arm tighten around me and I knew he was desperate for human contact, human comfort. It was easy with the shock to forget how appallingly he had suffered a few hours earlier. Gobber took station at the other side and let us out. I paused.

"We will use your office for the work-because it is private enough that no one can overlook us doing the search," I decided. "Please ensure there are appropriate accesses and equipment. And keep out of the way: it is the only way it can work." And then we left. I heard the door lock behind us and I sighed. I shared a concerned look with Gobber: Hiccup was bowed and beyond words. Though Stoick was alive, I feared he had killed a little more of his son.

oOo

"They did WHAT?" Alvin swept every object from his desk, furious at the news.

"Kidnapped Astrid Hofferson and Hiccup Haddock from the village and took them to a secured location where they were tortured for knowledge of the dragons," Savage reported. "Someone was after the identity of the Night Fury Rider!"

"BLUDVIST! Alvin roared. "Get "im on the screen-NOW!"" The call was placed and Alvin paced angrily as the shadowed and bulky shape of Bludvist appeared. The man's scarred face was grim.

"I see we need to talk!" he commented.
"No-yer need ter beg me forgiveness!" Alvin roared. "I 'ave me agents in play and yer interference 'as almost ruined the opportunity I set up her get yer dragons! Security got ramped up after yer kidnapping stunt and we 'ad ter abandon the attempt!"

"I am disappointed," Bludvist growled. Alvin scowled back.

"No-yer stupid and incompetent!" he roared. "Yer after me Night Fury Rider. We 'ad a deal-and yer not only broke it, yer blew it!" Bludvist frowned.

"I don't tolerate..."

"'Iccup 'Addock-Stoick's little boy...is the Night Fury Rider!" Alvin shouted. "Yer 'ad 'im and yer let 'im escape! If yer 'ad worked with me, I could 'ave told yer and we'd 'ave 'im safe and in our 'ands!" He took a deep breath.

"Those riders destroyed my complex..." Bludvist snarled, "and killed my best interrogator. Jarkan said the boy claimed to be the Night Fury Rider-but how could he be? He's a scrawny one-legged..."

"Smart-mouthed, stubborn, inventive dragon rider!" Alvin snarled. "I've been locking 'orns with 'im for years now!"

"And yet he remains free," Bludvist taunted him. Alvin balled his fists.

"I still 'ave me agents-and if yer want any of the dragons, Drago-yer better not start jumping' the gun again. Or yer can do all the donkey work yerself!" Bludvist scowled and leaned towards the camera.

"So we work together," he sneered. "But there's a change of plan. I want the dragon and I don't care about the boy-as long as I get to see him die!" Alvin gave a low chuckle.

"Ohh, I've been waiting for someone ter suggest that!" he exulted. "It will be me pleasure!"
Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

I refused to let him out of my sight when we got into the infirmary, recalling his reluctance to come here, as we manoeuvred him onto a couch and uncovered the horrible wounds on his arm. He turned his battered face to me and his grip tightened on my hand as I gaped at the deep slice into his skin. By me, Ragnar winced at the damage to his hand.

"He was going to cut my finger off," he said faintly. "Um…it was okay because he wanted to cut me up piece by piece so a few cuts are really nothing, Astrid…" I stared at him, unable to process what he was saying. Nothing? Oh, God-this was horrible.

"Hiccup…this isn't nothing," I tell him softly. His eyes conveyed his pain and he nodded.

"I know," he sighed. "But what does complaining achieve? It's done." He sounded defeated, accepting of the fact he still seemed to be everybody's punchbag and I felt my fury rise.

"And whoever did this has to pay!" I said tightly. He managed to quirk the smallest smile.

"Um…I think you may have already shot him dead," he reminded me softly. I stared at him and relaxed.

"Okay, not the best example," I muttered. "Just stay with me while Ragnar…"

"I want you to stitch me up," he told me quietly. I gaped.

"I-I…" I can't. Because it will hurt and I can't hurt you. "Hiccup…"

"I trust you, Astrid," he told me simply. "Please..." And his big green eyes pleaded as well. Dammit, Hiccup. Why do you have to be so...you? Why can't I say no?

"Ragnar does your hand and I will do your arm," I bargained. He read my face and nodded.

"Okay," he conceded. And so I found myself trembling, my stomach dancing with anxiety and nausea in my throat. This is why you don't treat family members: you can't keep the emotional distance you need to do a procedure, to accept that you will hurt people when you are helping them. And he was brave: he barely flinched as I injected the local and cleaned the wound, his eyes were calm as I put each suture in with my shaking hand, he kept talking to me and reassuring me that it looked great. And I tried not to see the tightness of his face and the hitch in his voice as I completed the task but he was grateful and the trust in his eyes never wavered. Ragnar had done his hand because the cut was deeper and far more awkward and frankly, he had loads more experience.

We headed back to his room-gods only knew what time it was but it had been another horrendously long and busy day. Scratch that-a nightmarish and traumatic day. He was leaning on me, quiet and brooding as we reached his room. He needed human contact and he never let me go, all the way back. So when he let himself in, I followed and read the gratitude in his eyes at my continued presence. I puttered around, tidying things up and folding away discarded clothes as he shrugged his shirt off—it would need washing. I grabbed it and his scarf as well, taking them to his shower room and grabbing the soap, scrubbing hard to get the blood out and get them clean. After about five minutes of careful work, I had done all I could and only the faintest of stains remained. They just needed a run through a normal wash cycle-so I draped them over the towel rail and came out-to find him already in bed, dressed in a grey T-shirt and shorts, his prosthetic carefully propped against the wall. He looked exhausted, with deep shadows under his eyes and his battered face
weary. I walked up to him and leaned forward to kiss him goodnight but he grabbed my hand and stared up into my eyes.

"Stay," he pleaded softly and I sighed but not unwillingly, because it had been a really trying day as well. As I moved, I remembered my cheek was bruised and I had been punched and kicked and involved in a car crash: the prospect of snuggling up against Hiccup was actually really appealing. So I quickly shrugged off my jeans and shoes and slid in beside him. He snuggled close and wrapped his arms around me.

"It's okay," I told him as I felt him press tighter and slid my arms around him. "I'm here, Dragon Boy and I won't let anything else happen to you." He gave a small sigh.

"I know," he admitted, "but I just can't stop thinking about it all." He closed his eyes and his head snuggled into my shoulder as I wriggled down the bed. "Bludvist claimed he was responsible for the accident that killed Mom. He made me an offer…to join him and take my revenge on Dad. And…I really considered it for a moment, Astrid, because I just recalled everything he hadn't done for his only child. But I knew that Bludvist ultimately had killed Mom and tried to kill me-so I told him to go to Hel. You know the rest…

But then when I got back here…I am told Dad had been killed. And everything I was thinking about, every omission, every absence, every time he wasn't there for me came back. And I felt so guilty, so awful because I had been blaming and hating him for abandoning me and all the crap I suffered because of that. And I just felt useless because he had died and the last thing he had seen of me was me being tortured, being so weak and useless again. Bludvist commented that my father must have felt such shame at having me as a son-and I felt that so keenly. I felt so ashamed of being me. And to find out that he was alive, that it was a lie and he had put me through all that torment without a second thought just made me feel…used. Irrelevant. Worthless. I know I never figure anywhere in his thoughts, Astrid. I know…he doesn't love me. I know he doesn't really care. But I still felt utterly heartbroken when I thought he had died, even though I think I hate him as well."

"Don't think about that now, babe, or your head will explode," I murmured sleepily. He was warm and gentle and I felt safe in his arms-which was nice considering the day we had had. He was hanging onto me for dear life and I realised dimly that he was someone who actually needed human contact. He really needed physical comfort and I guessed he hadn't been hugged since his Mum died. Until now. "You can love a family member and still hate some of the way they behave or what they do. You're not a bad man because of that. And he is a dreadful father, a man incapable of expressing his emotions and his affection for you. He does care, Hiccup-he just really has no clue how to say or show it."

"Which is as good as not caring at all," he murmured. I nodded.

"Take it from me-I had a great Dad," I said softly. "I never doubted his love. I knew what he felt, that he would do everything for me if I needed him. I loved him constantly and I miss him every single day. Your father's still alive so you still have a chance to communicate with him. Don't waste that." He nuzzled my cheek.

"What would I do without you?" he asked softly. I smiled.

"Have to shoot your own bad guys," I murmured. I felt him move and lift his head slightly, looking carefully into my face.

"Can't shoot," he murmured, his voice ashamed. I frowned.
"I can sort that out, Dragon Boy," I promised. "I will take you to the range and teach you."

"Did you really chew my father out over how he treated me?" he asked me in a surprised voice, still thinking back over the evening. I gave a small smile.

"Um…I'll probably get put in the brig for that," I murmured. "He deserved it, thoughtless ass! God, how can he be so stupid when everyone says he's a great leader, when everyone who works for him says he's loved by his men!" He fidgeted again and his hug tightened.

"Astrid…will-will you be my girlfriend?" he breathed in a hesitant voice. I could tell he had feared I would reject him but I moved my face and kissed his cheek.

"Of course, doofus," I sighed. "Though I thought you were already my boyfriend…" He kissed me back and I stared into those green eyes, swimming with love and need and trust and I ran my fingers through his messy auburn hair.

"I thought you just said that as an excuse…" he murmured awkwardly.

"For jumping the guys beating you up? Yeah, really needed a reason for that! No, but I hated seeing those bastards harming someone I lo…" I stopped. I had almost said it and I bit my lip. His breathing paused and I felt him move. "One word, Dragon Boy, and I'm kicking you outta bed."

"But this is my bed!" he protested. I shifted my position, made sure I had a nice comfortable grip on his lanky shape and snuggled my head into his chest. I felt him rest his chin gently on the top of my head.

"Don't push your luck," I murmured and dropped off to sleep.

I woke nicely warm and still cuddled in Hiccup's arms. He was snoring gently, his head resting against mine. He hadn't moved all night and I realised that he had been hugging me all night as well.

The last part of yesterday ran through my memory and his reaction hit me once more. The General's deception had wounded him far worse and more deeply that I had even guessed: he would need all my support and reassurance. And we had work to do: Stoick had bought us a distraction with his reported death and we needed to use that to find the traitor. I moved.

His eyes opened and he gave a sleepy smile. "Five more minutes," he mumbled, burrowing into my shoulder.

"Don't you dare," I grumbled, fidgeting. "We've got work to do, Dragon Boy."

"No one told me you were a slave-driver, Milady," he protested sleepily.

"Hah! You never asked, doofus!" My tone was triumphant.

"Is that the word of the week?"

"I can find some other ones, you lazy, lanky, snoring…"

"I do not snore!"

"Do too! Kinda cute, though and pretty relaxing, all things considered."
He huffed and reluctantly opened his eyes. He unwound his arms from around me and gave a huge stretch. This was followed immediately by a few 'ow's and cracks. He winced as he sat up: he had been beaten black and blue during our captivity and those bruises were making themselves felt. It looked like everything was stiff. I was already out of bed and grabbing my things to go back and get a shower. I gave him a hard glare. "Half an hour, Dragon Boy-and I will pick you up here! Do NOT leave this room without me!" I winked. "I mean it!" I added. He sat up stiffly and gave a really bad salute.

"Yes, Ma'am!" he shot back as I slid out the door.

I collected him for whichever meal was being served now-I think it may have been late breakfast-and we walked in together, his hand finding mine at the door. I think the other Riders who were there-Eret, Cami, Snotlout and the twins-expected us to be together and they made no comments as we sat on the table next to them, not making eye contact. I was concentrating on my porridge and inhaling a large mug of coffee while Hiccup was toying with his bacon and eggs and clearly thinking. I'd already realised that he tended to brood and could seriously over-think things. That, coupled with chronic absence of self-esteem, meant he usually came to the worst possible conclusion and usually beat himself up unnecessarily. I was watching him carefully and keeping a light small talk going when then it happened. We heard the scrape of chairs and the sound of footsteps and then we were surrounded by the Riders. Hiccup visibly stiffened.

"I'm really sorry about Uncle Stoick, cuz," Snotlout said and he actually sounded genuine. "If…if there's anything you want…er…need…well, you can just…you know…"

"He was a great man," Eret added and Hiccup dropped his knife and his hand clenched into a fist.

"I really respected him," Tuffnut added.

"Didn't show it," Ruffnut reminded him.

"It was stealthy respect," Tuffnut told her cheerfully.

"Yeah-Uncle Stoick was a great guy," Snotlout added nostalgically. Hiccup swallowed.

"He'd be happy to hear that," he said tightly. "He liked you more than me anyway," He was almost shaking with anger. I looked up at them and tried some subtle gestures which none of them took any notice of.

"You're his son-of course he liked you!" Eret told him.

"Yeah-he was always favouring you," Cami added. "He clearly…"

"SHUT UP!" Hiccup snarled, jerking himself to his feet and almost incandescent with rage. He was staring fiercely at the the table. "None of you know what the Hel you're talking about! Thanks for the condolences but now…" And he shoved himself away from the table and walked stiffly out without meeting a single Rider's eye. I sighed, threw our food onto a tray and glared at them all.

"Note for the future," I growled as I got up. "When someone does the choppy beheading hand signal, it means shut the fuck up and go away!" And I sped after him, carrying our food. I caught up with him in the corridor because he was steaming but didn't want to go to Stoick's office without me. He had already cooled down enough to regret his outburst but I shrugged-carefully. "They mean well," I reminded him as we walked slowly down the corridor. Pitying eyes watched Hiccup wherever he went and I could feel the collective urge to come and offer their sympathies. I warned them off with a glare. "They just don't always do well."
"Always? Ever!" he snapped.

"Harsh—since they did a pretty good job of rescuing us," I reminded him. "There are some talents and abilities in that group—I just don't think we've properly harnessed them yet." He paused for a long moment then continued walking wordlessly. I could tell he was still steaming so I shifted the tray and managed to get a drink of my coffee as we walked. He was breathing heavily and finally he stopped.

"Astrid…I'm not sure I can do this…” he said in a low voice. "The lies, the pretence, the…deceit."

"Then don't," I told him softly. "Do what you are good at, babe. You are a decent, honest man: you are also the person best placed to solve this puzzle. Don't think about what is in the past, about what you think you can't do: concentrate on what you can.” He paused, then leaned closer to me and ghosted a kiss on my cheek.

"I don't deserve you, Milady," he sighed.

"Hmm, that's a shame because you're the one I want, Dragon Boy," I told him quietly as we resumed our walk to the General's office. I motioned for him to get the door and he managed with his one good arm, allowing me in. He closed and locked the door behind us and I laid the tray on a chair as he inspected the desk. The General's huge steel and glass desk now had three screens and keyboards, networked to the mainframe. Stoick's chair was nowhere to be seen—because anyone who saw the chair would turn it to see that though the back was a disastrous mess, the leather on the front was completely intact and free of blood. Hiccup sat down on the standard chair and I cast around, seeing a further console at the side of the room. I cast a glance to Hiccup.

He was smiling, his hands flying over the keys and logging into a dozen systems. Even his bandaged left hand didn't seem to slow him down. His green eyes were focussed on the screens as he accessed various systems and began an audacious search that security should have considered and completed weeks, if not months earlier. I found a perch behind him and watched as he set up his parameters. It was a complicated programme he planned: each incident was logged in with time, place and personnel. He also ensured that anyone who was in their rooms, office or locker were confirmed visually by surveillance to have gone and stayed in there for the specified timeframe as these would be the easiest places to leave their ID and com while sneaking off to attack the Riders.

I watched him—focussed, still, each movement purposeful and measured. And I realised that this was the Hiccup I really didn't get to see. This wasn't a civilian struggling in a military unit with people who despised him or a skinny outsider victimised by a group of insufferable bastards or a young man with chronic abandonment, persecution and father issues—this was the computer nerd who had done his doctorate in under two years while learning to care for and ride a dragon and read ancient Norse. This was the guy Ozzie and Gobber knew and liked. This was who Hiccup really was.

"That looks complicated," I said quietly, not wanting to disturb him. He looked up and stretched: he was looking cramped and he automatically reached for the dregs of his cold coffee. I reminded myself that I would need to go get some more.

"No more than most of the other systems," he sighed. "It's just repetitive: I have to put the same parameters, exceptions and additions into each search—and I've got a few: my interrogation when Dagur got in and…made things interesting, when you were training Stormfly and she went out of control, when you were shot while we were on Toothless, when Ozzie died, when Heather escaped…” He frowned. "I've added a couple more incidents that I was suspicious of as well—such as when the dragons were let out into the glen without authorisation, when Stormfly went crazy…”
"I thought you blamed the twins," I put in. He gave a sigh.

"I may still—if they show up in the pens at the right times," he admitted, "but it seems curious that she was the only one to show such stress—and was the one that Alvin seemed to be targeting. Maybe they were trying to ensure she didn't bond so she would be easier to steal?"

"You know Heather said they wanted her because they have a male Nadder so they could breed," I began. He swung his chair slowly round to face me. He could guess where I was going. "They have a Changewing as well—why don't they want Dogsbreath's dragon?" He burst out laughing. I huffed at him and pouted: I couldn't get the joke. He grabbed my hand to apologise.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "Both the Changewings are male. They couldn't breed even if Alvin had them both—and this isn't 'Jurassic Park' where same sex creatures can conveniently change sex to further the plot! Anyway, putting them together would probably have one killing the other—they really aren't too friendly…and they are really difficult dragons to ride. Nadders are far better!" I squeezed his hand back and let him get back to his work, using the unoccupied console to log into my account. There was something nagging me—from that horrible night Ozzie was killed. I opened my emails and scrolled down the list.

To: Hofferson, Astrid

From: Oswaldson, Oswald

HIC…ITS NOT WHAT WE THOUGHT..WE'RE LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACE…HES UNDER OUR NO…

I frowned and then opened the others I had forwarded to myself: Ozzie had been searching through the security staff rosters, matching names and dates and CCTV of the guards. He didn't have the full access to the security system Hiccup had but he was clearly onto something. And then I realised that someone must have realised he was onto them…and that would imply they were watching out for search of this kind—and had the means to end an inconvenient IT technician. And that combination could only mean…security.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Who watches the watchmen?

And if security was rotten, then all those precious screenings for loyalty after Dagur, Savage and Vorg left would be worse than useless. Traitors would be waved on. Treason would masquerade as incompetence. Unlimited access to the base, knowledge of all protocols, ease of getting things in…and crucially out.

Like a message…


"I-I…would need to check…" he admitted, looking up at my worried tone.

"It means all external communications are severed and can only be restored by the commanding officer of the base," Stoick said gruffly from the door. Who knows how long he had been listening? Hiccup stiffened and stared solidly at the screens, not looking up or acknowledging his father in any way. Stoick took a couple of steps into the room and inspected the new configuration. His scowl deepened.

"Does that means coms only or includes mobiles, portable devices, internet, pagers and everything
in between?" I laid a hand on his shoulder and felt him trembling.

"The dampening field we use to cut us off from the world field precludes any communication between anyone on the base and the outside-short of going out for a walk and taking a satellite phone-or a mirror for Morse code…” Stoick confirmed.

"And no one is allowed out?" I checked.

"No the whole base is guarded and all exits are locked…”

"And this just assumes security is clean, does it?" I asked. Hiccup looked up and his eyes widened at my implication. Stoick glared at me and then shook his head.

"Of course," he said slowly. I looked into his eyes.

"It's not," I said with certainty. "I now know for sure that Ozzie was killed by a member of the security team."
"You are saying the security team harbours the traitor?"

"That's exactly what I am saying," I said levelly. "Ozzie was investigating them-and suddenly Ozzie ends up dead. He wasn't looking into anything else. And he had been to see Heather but she had no visitors-not even her guards-between the visit and Ozzie's death. Only security would know he was investigating them. Only they would have the motive to kill."

Hiccup was looking sick and I felt really bad that I had unnerved him even more but Stoick was eyeing me very carefully. "Have you any proof?"

"Circumstantial against the department but none specific-until Hiccup completes his investigations, sir," I admitted.

"I see you've decided to acknowledge my rank again," he said pointedly. I nodded curtly.

"Sir," I said coolly. Stoick met my gaze and sighed, inspecting his son carefully.

"I know you don't approve of my actions, Lieutenant," he said, emphasising my junior rank. I said nothing. "However, the situation cannot continue. BERK is open and we need to plug the gaps before anyone else is killed. There have been attempts on your life, my life, my son's and Ozzie's. This was the only way."

"You should have told Hiccup," I insisted through gritted teeth. He shrugged.

"I understand," he said quietly. "Son?"

"You're alive. Got it," Hiccup said tonelessly. "I've got work to do." Stoick paused.

"If you need a break, I will deadlock the room-your cards only. Not even I could get in here until you return," he offered. I nodded and he withdrew, leaving Hiccup glaring at the screens, his body rigid. Cautiously, I walked round to him and gently wrapped my arms around his shoulders, resting my chin on his shoulder and staring at the screen in front of him. I felt the tension begin to ease and he tenderly rested his head against mine.

"You've got to talk to him some time," I reminded him. He closed his eyes and leaned into me. I could feel him trembling.

"Maybe in a year or so," he sighed. "Astrid…I-I just can't forgive him so easily. That…was the cruellest thing he's done to me." I snuggled harder against him and he raised his bandaged hand to caress mine. "I gotta keep going-I've nearly got the parameters in. Then I just run the search: the programme will cross reference for me once I've finished." I stole a kiss on his cheek then let him go.

"You finish up-I'll go get some coffees," I sighed and grabbed the tray, tidied up the empty cups and headed out, carefully closing the door behind me. It wasn't a long walk back to the Mess but, for the first time, I felt nervous. I knew now that I could trust no one but those I had agreed with Hiccup. And that list was very, very short: us two, his father, Gothi and Gobber. I wanted to trust Cami as well…but beyond that, I didn't know anyone well enough and my trusting gland was firmly switched off until we had the answers. I glimpsed two of the security team and I tried not to stiffen: that was the worst. In all my various lives, I had to trust security, trust to their oaths of loyalty and their protection of my person from danger. To know that they were the problem was...
the most unsettling of all.

A horrible thought struck me. What if it was Fishlegs? The husky, blond MP and Rider had seemed genuinely nice, a quiet and slightly nerdy guy so unlike the rest of the pathological extroverts in the team. I glanced up as I stowed the tray in the Mess and saw Dogsbreath grabbing a bag of potato chips and a can of cola and I nodded to him. He blanked me and I rolled my eyes. Hiccup had been right about that as well: being his buddy didn't do much for my social life with the other Riders. I shivered and approached the machine, frowning and calling up a large white Americano to go.

"He'll fuck it up," Dogsbreath Donald told me, standing behind me. "He always does. He tried it on with Heather, once-and then let her down. Dagur was furious at him for that-called him out for it and kicked the crap out of him in front of the other Riders. We all saw-and Heather was so humiliated. It was a blessing when Eret asked her out-he's a decent guy. You seem…okay, actually so I would hate you to be hurt by him." I frowned and swapped the cups, calling up a skinny latte for myself. I stabbed the button.

"Thanks," I said quietly, wondering where he was going.

"Ever wondered why he doesn't have a girlfriend? Why he's never had a girlfriend?" Dogsbreath asked me.

"Um, yeah?"

Now I knew.

"Dagur," he told me. "After the Heather thing…he and Hic were…an item. At it like rabbits, in fact. He liked it rough and Dagur gave it to him in spades. I think we were still having sex even when Dagur defected. How Hiccup ever got cleared to stay beats me." He looked me in the eye. "Your boyfriend is gay."

I blinked. It was a very persuasive argument and I knew Hiccup hadn't ever been out with a girl. And which as more plausible? Actually being into guys or being so pathetic, so utterly socially inadequate that no girl would agree to go out with you? Hiccup admitted Dagur had thing for him-and it did seem to scare him. And certainly something horrific happened to him in that home-had that changed his preferences or had he always been into men…?

And then I kicked myself. God, I was turning into Hiccup, overthinking things. Use the evidence of your own eyes, girl! I just had to think back to the way he admitted his previous rejections by girls, the utter shame and humiliation of the words. The way he blushed so fiercely, the tremble in his voice. A lie or a pretence wouldn't carry such deep raw emotion. And when he had asked me to be his girlfriend, he had expected rejection as well. As he had been rejected before. Even with me, he had no confidence.

Yup, socially inadequate and pathetic about summed it up. But only in relationships. In other areas, he was amazing-kind, affectionate, clever, sarcastic, brave, determined…and mine.

"Thanks," I forced myself to say lightly. "That's very kind of you." He shrugged, popping open his can.

"Us Riders should stick together," he shrugged and swung out of the Mess. I glared after him, wanting to throw a knife at him for the cruel slander, then grabbed an orange and chocolate chip muffin and headed back to the General's Office. I opened the door and found him hunched over his keyboards, fingers dancing, eyes flicking from screen to screen, confirming security camera images, amending his data. I quietly walked up and rested the coffee on his desk. Automatically, he reached for it and took a long sip. He gave a long and satisfied sigh.
"Thanks, Milady," he said and his tone was relieved, grateful. He glanced up and he was starting to look tired. I remembered that he was still badly battered from his ordeal yesterday and he needed rest-like that was going to happen in this place! I pushed the muffin towards him and perched on the edge of the desk, sipping my latte. He broke a chunk of muffin off and chewed with a satisfied smile. He gave another sigh. "I'm all but done," he admitted. "Just need to enter the last time with confidence intervals and then initiate."

"How long will it take?" I asked him and he frowned.

"Complex search and correlation of a lot of variables," he murmured. "Couple of hours-maybe more? And even then, I may have to manually view the security vids to see if I can confirm identities if the facial recognition software can't get a lock because the person is looking away or hiding in some way..." He tore another chunk off the muffin and then offered me a piece. I accepted it with a smile.

"So you have a little time to do something with me?" I asked. He looked panicked.

"Oh gods, not a date?" he murmured. "Look, I think now if we went for coffee, the damned machine would explode and scald us!"

"No, Dragon Boy, I am not asking you to make a social appointment with me," I smirked. "You tried taking me dragon riding: I think you need to learn to shoot."

"Oh Thor, a social appointment with guns?" he groaned. "I will end up shot, won't I?"

"Not by me," I said smugly. "I have an excellent marksman rating." He looked up at me and saw I was serious, so he sighed and finished inputting his data, gulping down his coffee and muttering a tiny prayer to the gods. Then he hit enter and the screen blanked, then images and rosters began to whirl across. He sat back and finished his coffee.

"Watching the computer save the day doesn't actually make for interesting viewing," he admitted. "Even for a computer nerd."

"It was okay in Independence Day," I reminded him.

"That was a few seconds with tension-building music, not hours in my father's office," he protested and struggled up to his feet. "Okay, let's go and get shot...I mean shoot..." I scowled at him.

"You have no confidence in me," I grumbled as we exited the room and the room deadlocked. He took my hand as we walked along. I was having to lead because I was pretty sure that he'd never been to the range before.

"Actually, I have no confidence in myself," he told me gently. "I'll probably shoot myself in my good leg!" I looked up at him and smiled at the dry humour. He was clearly apprehensive because this activity was really military and he was a long way out of his comfort zone. We headed down and I swiped us in, signed for the weapons, chose our lanes and handed Hiccup glasses and ear protection. We checked the lane was safe as I glanced at him. He was looking worried and stood carefully behind me.

"Ready?" I asked. He nodded as I checked the lane was clear and he pulled his ear defenders down. I lifted my weapon and fired six shots in quick succession, all hitting the central part of the target. I smiled, laid my weapon down and thumbed the safety back on. I pulled the target closer and examined my hits: nice grouping, all in the centre, a good exercise. Then I turned to Hiccup. He looked at me and bit his lip.
"Can I say 'Holy Shit!?'" he asked me, eyes wide. He knew I was competent but he hadn't realised I was actually good. Really good.

"I will accept a round of applause as well," I told him smugly. He swallowed and eyed his own weapon, sitting on the side, as if it were a hand grenade without a pin.

"Okay, what do I do?" he asked. I handed him the pistol.

"Starter weapon," I explained. "You can fire single shot or multiple. The gun should be pointed down the range or at the floor ONLY. Keep it on safety unless you are using it." He reached for it. "You're left-handed, right?" He nodded. "Then use your left hand," I advised him. He flushed.

"Um, my Dad used to make me do everything with my right hand-because otherwise I would be abnormal," he admitted. My eyes widened. What century did his father think we lived in?

"What hand and what eye do you use instinctively?" I asked him. He looked flustered so I threw something at him-and he caught it with his left hand. After a bit of checking, I realised he was left eye dominant as well so I helped him get into position, taught him how to hold the gun-awkward because of his bandages-and how to aim. We fired single rounds only as I assessed his grip, his aim, his stance. He tried but he was really jumpy and was almost scared of the weapon. I stood really close, in contact with him as he aimed and I guess that may not have helped either. Finally, I got him to fire a full six shots: he hit the target four times-clipping the edge twice, once close to the edge and once almost central. Then he put his weapon down and removed his ear protectors as I brought the target closer to inspect his results.

"Um…sorry," he apologised, seeing his results. I smiled gently.

"Actually—that's really good for a first go," I told him. "My first attempt was far worse." His eyes widened.

"I find that hard to believe," he told me honestly. I grinned.

"Well, you don't learn to be a sharpshooter in a couple of lessons," I reminded him. "At least two hours, both days every weekend for six years as well as mandatory range drill during basic training and exercises. You gotta put in the hours-as you have with learning to ride Toothless." He sighed.

"You make it look so easy," he admitted. I grinned.

"That's sweet, babe," I told him as the door opened and another person walked in for practice. Our lanes were still lit so I lifted my weapon and nodded to him as the newcomer got his kit. I focussed, hit the alarm and sent another six into the target. Another six solid hits, all around the centre. I was flying today, much more relaxed than usual. I motioned Hiccup to lift his weapon and take a final set of shots as a uniformed man closed, took up station in the next lane and nodded. Hiccup fired and I nodded, then watched him make his weapon safe. I brought his last target closer to check his scores: all six were in the target, two close to the centre. He gave a smirk.

"Marksman in one easy lesson!" he grinned and then turned to pull his ear protection off and froze. He tapped me urgently on the arm and I looked up.

The man in the next lane had his gun trained on us.

I stared at him in horror and froze as well.

"Hands where I can see them," he ordered and motioned us to remove our ear protection. Hiccup did and I saw his hand brush against his com. The man levelled his gun at him. "No funny
business, Hiccup!" He spat the name as if it was poisonous.

"What—what do you want?" he asked the security man. I read the name on his uniform: DACRE.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he sneered. Hiccup inspected him and said very quietly:

"Yes, I do." He was breathing hard, his body stiff. The man—probably in his forties with a rugged, weathered face, salt and pepper buzz cut and cold grey eyes, smiled.

"Your interrogation for stealing the black dragon," he reminded Hiccup. I stared: this was not good. "Alvin and Dagur wanted it."

"Toothless is a him, not an it," Hiccup said tightly.

"So you thought you could keep him from us?" Dacre sneered.

"That had been my intention," Hiccup said tonelessly. His hands were shaking.

"Dagur was much more effective in getting you to talk," Dacre continued. "You however didn't do so well. He's a nasty mind, that one, but it was amusing."

"Not for some of us," Hiccup added tonelessly.

"You don't like being whipped, do you?" Dacre taunted him. Hiccup stared at him wordlessly. "Does she know? Have you shown her what he did to you?" Hiccup remained motionless so the traitor motioned with his gun. "C'mon, boy—let her see what a mess you are!"

"She already knows," he muttered.

"NOW!" The tone was impatient and I guessed he wouldn't hesitate to shoot. Reluctantly, Hiccup grabbed his green check shirt and hauled it up to his shoulders, exposing his lean and very battered torso. My eyes flicked over the red weals that still criss-crossed his back, his shoulders slumped. I had seen them back in my own apartment when he had been so ill: when I had first realised what a horrible time he had faced back in BERK. They still looked sickening now and my heart clenched at the reminder of his ordeal. "Show me—turn round!" And he slowly rotated to look towards me, his head down and cheeks flushed with shame. His emerald eyes flicked up for a second and he mouthed 'sorry' to me before inspecting the floor again.

"Beautiful," Dacre sneered and it was such a Dagur-like comment that I frowned.

"What do you want?" Hiccup asked dully, turning back to face the man and stand between him and me.

"You are trying to expose me," Dacre said matter-of-factly. "So you need to be stopped. Alvin wants you, boy. Dagur definitely wants you..." Hiccup shuddered as he let his shirt drop back down. "So we'll hand you over and your dragon will come of its own free will. It will not abandon you."

"He's not stupid either," Hiccup said as I slid his gun into my hand.

"But the girl has to go—we need the Nadder and we don't need a rider for that one," Dacre snarled and lifted his weapon. "Stand aside, boy!" Hiccup stared as I swung round and fired at the light control panel. Simultaneously, I kicked his good leg from under him, hating myself as he went down with a crash and the light went out. I flung myself down as well as the muzzle flash of a volley of bullets zinged perilously close over our heads. But I was firing as well, straight at where I
recalled he was and the muzzle flash marked. I heard at least one hit and a cry.

But I wasn't hanging around, rising to my feet, grabbing an arm and hauling Hiccup away, pulling him behind the lane divider as I heard Dacre crash around looking for us. I clapped my hand over his mouth as I heard the traitor stumble around. There were a couple of lights over the fire exits and they cast the faintest of lights. I could just see the edge of Hiccup's shocked face, his eyes wide and dark with fear. I lifted my trank-gun and listened for him—and I could hear him closing.

"You won't get away again," he sneered as Hiccup grabbed his weapon and fired wildly in the direction of the words. The muzzle flash gave us away but I was already up, hauling him over the counter and into the lanes. We pressed hard against the dividers and hardly dared breathe. We were trapped and no one would come looking for us. I tightened my grip on the weapon and was glad we'd deadlocked the General's Office: even if something bad happened, they would still lose. I heard shots zing over our heads and knew he was close.

Then I heard a noise: a huff of alien breathing, the creak of floorboards, the slither of leathery wings. Hiccup stiffened against me as the man laughed. "They'll suspect it was Stoick's little embarrassment fucking up for a final time!" he sneered and I felt Hiccup flinch then: God, they must have tormented him for years with that name. But his hand fumbled and found mine and his thumb gently circled in my palm, the motion and feel soothing. Then he began to stroke my palm—

one small stroke…break…three small strokes…break…three small strokes…break…one small stroke…break…four little taps… My eyes widened. Morse code. Clever boy…

T…O…O…T…H…

Toothless?

*How the hell was he here?*

"Get him, bud," Hiccup whispered.

"You didn't think you could outwit Alvin the Treacherous?" Dacre sneered, lifting his gun above us.

Then a blinding burst of purple plasma exploded just above us and Hiccup threw himself across me, his hand pressing my head against the floor as the impact blasted the man, the dividers and the range apart. There was the slam of a body hitting the far wall and I lifted my head, seeing Dacre slumped, his chest smoking and blasted open. My ears were ringing as Hiccup crawled up and murmured "Thanks, bud!"

The dragon bounded into his arms and he hugged the blunt head fiercely, the eyes luminous green in the very dim light. I pushed back to my feet and scrambled up, vaulted the remains of the lanes and found the emergency lighting, slamming the lever over and lighting the place with a deep red glow. Hiccup was still hugging his dragon and Dacre was slumped. Professionally, I checked for signs of life but the fact there were none was no surprise as half his chest had been blown away. I looked up at the Night Fury, his pupils wide and his expression puppy-like. He bounced over and nuzzled against me and I stroked him gratefully.

"Thanks, boy," I said genuinely. "Wow, that was impressive." Then I looked at Hiccup who was levering himself painfully to his feet. "And just how did he get out?" He looked shifty and I narrowed my eyes as I secured the weapons and reracked them. Hiccup painfully clambered back to stand by my side as Toothless bounded over to stand loyally by him.

"Erm…I may have done something when I had enhanced security access," he admitted, staring at
the ground. Then he gave a very small smile. "I hooked control of Toothless's Pen to my com: when we were in trouble, I opened it. I knew he would come looking for me." He lifted his face and stared into my eyes. "He was right about one thing: Toothless won't abandon me. He is loyal and brave and my best friend. And Night Furies have an excellent sense of smell. It was easy for him to find me!"

"And he has four trackers!" I reminded Hiccup. "There will be all sorts of security looking for him. And you will be in it up to your eyebrows if they find you let him out…which they will…"

"He just saved our lives," he reminded me, resting his hand on Toothless's muzzle. He sounded hurt. I led him towards the door and lifted my com to my mouth.

"Hmm…Gobber? It's Astrid. Something very weird has just happened: Toothless has just turned up here in the range!"

"What? How did that happen, lass?"

"Not a clue, Gobber, but he appears to have just saved our lives from someone who thought we would be better off dead. Can you stop security messing up my day even more and let us take Toothless to the Office? I think we need to stay there until we have our answer."

"Hmm—not asking fer much, are ye, lass?" the voice floated back. Gobber sounded half annoyed and half amused.

"Never," I smiled back. "Are we good to go?"

"Okay, lass," he sighed and we headed out of the door. Hiccup was walking with his hand on his dragon, his head down and looking unhappy.

"What is it?" I asked him and he sighed, paused and took my hand.

"I thought I would lose you," he said softly. "I can't risk losing you. Astrid…it would kill me. I would rather have taken than bullet than you!"

"You think I wanted to watch you get shot either, you dork?" I snapped, closing to a few inches from him and winding his hand in mine. "I have lost pretty much everyone else I love: I am not losing you!" His eyes widened and he inspected my face: what I had implied…had him blushing. So he leaned close to me and, hesitating for a long moment, he pressed a tender kiss onto my lips. I melted into him as he wrapped an arm around me, holding me firm. I dug my hands into his messy hair and deepened the kiss, until we broke apart for air. He managed a dazed smirk.

"I'll try very very hard not to get lost, Milady," he promised me. Toothless gave a little croon. "Yeah, yeah-I love you too, useless reptile…” I stared up into his face and smiled.

"I'll hold you to that, Dragon Boy," I murmured, my hand still entwined with his. "By the way…best date ever!" He gave a low chuckle, nuzzling my hair.

"Hmm, neither of us is in the infirmary or kidnapped," he murmured, "so I suppose this counts as a success."

"One and a half to nil!" I confirmed. He rolled his eyes.

"Is everything a competition?" he asked me with a groan.

"LOSER!" I commented, making the 'L' sign to him with my right hand on my forehead.
"Oh gods..." he murmured as his com bleeped. He glanced and his face grew serious. "We have our answer..."

"It better be Dacre," I murmured. He cast me a worried look then grabbed my hand and accelerated towards the office, Toothless bouncing along behind us. We swiped in quickly and let the dragon in, then closed and locked the door carefully. Hiccup almost ran to the computers and I was a couple of steps behind him. He threw himself into the chair and stared at the screens. I stood behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder. Not to be left out, Toothless gave a little warble and coiled round the desk, inspecting the computer screens suspiciously.

"The timings did not match any single person," he read. "The highest probability with correlates to the majority of instances are...Security Officers Ronald Dacre and Petter Amund." He stiffened.

"The guards who were supposed to be in charge of your interrogation and who let Dagur come in and torture you," I realised. He nodded wordlessly, his throat working. I took his hand and he squeezed tightly. "Dacre's dead. Where's Amund?"

"Petter Amund is not in the base..." he read and frowned. "What the Hel? How did that...?" he muttered but I peered at the screen. There was more.

"There were sufficient anomalies and correlations to include two others," I read and then the names scrolled up.

"Oh crap..."
"There are two more traitors..." Hiccup echoed, his green eyes wide with horror. His hand raised to touch the screen as the names appeared.

...HARRIGAN...

...JORGENSON...

"Oh crap," I murmured.

"Which—which one?" Hiccup muttered, almost not daring to breathe. Uncle or cousin? Which would be worse? I glanced at him and he took a breath, then interrogated the computer. The image wound back to security footage of IT lab two. I stared at Hiccup and saw he had lost all his colour as we saw the image of Ozzie, typing rapidly at the console. The door swung open and a shape in uniform walked in: stocky, jet hair, purposeful. He walked up to stand by Ozzie and I saw him look up and open his mouth. A gun was raised and two shots buried in Ozzie's neck. He looked up in shock and half-stood as the man rapidly left. We watched Ozzie slump over the keyboard—just as Hiccup had found him. The image at the door froze and Hiccup magnified and processed the face.

"Spitelout," he breathed. I started: there was real hatred in that word. I felt gutted as well: it explained everything, of course, but he was a senior officer and the General's beloved brother to boot. It was horrible.

"Hiccup," I said quietly, resting both hands on his shoulders: he was shaking and I felt totally unnerved as well. "You gotta tell the General." He slowly lifted his head and nodded curtly.

"Yeah," he breathed, rising and ghosting a stroke over Toothless's muzzle. The dragon gave a little grumble, unsure what had upset his rider so much and he nudged Hiccup. The Rider was breathing hard and he rubbed the dragon once, then walked past him towards the door to the adjacent room, hammering on it with his fist. I raced after him as it opened and I slid in after him. Hiccup was furious but shocked as well.

Stoick was sitting in a huge black leather armchair, a reading lamp lit at his side and a well-thumbed hardback copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* in his hands. A crystal tumbler of amber liquid—probably some horrible whiskey—was at his elbow and he looked up calmly at the rigid shape of his son. Clearly, he was enjoying his death thoroughly. "Son?" he asked mildly. Hiccup stalked right up to him, his face tight with fury.

"I was right—you are fucking incompetent!" he raged. Stoick stiffened and laid the book aside, rising from his chair like a mountain slowly getting up, his eyes hard as he faced the challenge head on.

"And the basis of your assumption, boy?" he growled. Hiccup bunched his fists.

"Your fucking head of security is a traitor!" he hissed. Stoick reeled.

"You're wrong," he said flatly.

"I have the proof," Hiccup told him brutally.

"You're wrong. He is my brother. I trust him with my life," Stoick said angrily.
"Shame. Shouldn't have trusted him with Ozzie's though—he killed him!" Hiccup spat. He beckoned and stalked back into the office and Stoick followed, pausing in shock as he clapped eyes on the neatly curled shape of Toothless, parked by the desk.

"What the Hel is he doing here?" he roared.

"Shut up." Hiccup was so far gone beyond all reason that the General just blinked, let it go-for now-and walked past the Night Fury to peer at the screen. Hiccup hit the button to replay the scene we had witnessed then looked away as the horrific drama unfolded. I laid a hand on his shoulder and he rested his head against it, his breathing heavy: he was clearly fighting for control now because he had found out who had killed his best friend. His bandaged hand snaked round my waist and pulled me close, then he turned and buried his head in my body. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling him shuddering against me. I leaned forward and kissed the top of his head.

"I'm here, babe," I murmured. Stoick straightened up and his eyes widened as he saw us—then he cleared his throat.

"I will deal with it," he said in a growl. "Gobber-bring Snotlout to my office now." Hiccup's head snapped up and he lurched to his feet, pulling away from me.

"No-he's mine!" he snapped. Stoick put a huge paw out and stopped him dead.

"He is my brother and he has betrayed me!" the General said in a voice that invited no debate. "I have known him my whole life—and he has aligned himself with people who have tried to kill me and my son." His voice dropped to a low snarl. "If anyone takes him down, it's me!"

"He killed Ozzie," Hiccup argued, his eyes dark with fury.

"And he will pay, son—but he is my responsibility!" the General insisted gruffly. I think he was struggling with this news as well: how do you cope with the news that your own brother who you love and trust above all has betrayed you?

"He used the *Aurisdraconis* darts," I reminded the General. "Don't let him shoot you." He turned to me but stopped as he understood my warning. "There is no antidote. Two will cause irreparable multi-organ failure. It's what he used on Ozzie." He nodded curtly and his eyes alighted on Toothless again.

"What is the dragon doing in my office?" he growled, latching onto something less contentious.

"He saved our lives when Dacre tried to kill us in the range," Hiccup said in a flat voice. He suddenly seemed to have lost all his fight.

"Dacre, Amund and Harrigan are also traitors," I added. "Dacre is dead, Amund is gone and we haven't checked Dogsbreath yet."

"Another Rider," Stoick growled as there was a knock on the door. It opened and Gobber ambled in—followed by Snotlout, who froze at the doorway. His eyes almost popped out on stalks. "U-uncle?" he gasped. "YOU'RE ALIVE!" Stoick scowled.

"Well spotted," I commented. Snotlout glanced up—and saw Hiccup and I standing at the desk. His face contorted into a scowl of anger.

"You knew!" he accused us. "And you gave me a mouthful of grief, Useless! I really oughtta…"
"Snotlout, you weren't called here to spout empty threats against your senior officer," the General told him grimly. "We have a problem." He beckoned the Rider to follow him into the next room and slammed the door. I looked up at Gobber as the older man walked carefully towards Hiccup. He beckoned the Rider to come closer, recognising his utter distress and Hiccup slowly walked forward to be wrapped in a huge embrace by the older man. After an awkward moment, Hiccup buried his head in Gobber's shoulder.

"He killed Ozzie," Hiccup murmured, his voice now shaking. The hurt was painful to hear. "He just executed him like...like a dog. He was my friend, Gobber and he just took him away. I-I can't tell you how much I hate him..." The Colonel patted him in a self-conscious way on the back.

"That's why you shouldn't do this, laddie," he said gently. "The man is your uncle and the father of your cousin. If you face him, you likely tae kill him. Do you want that on your conscience?"

"I could live with that," Hiccup said grimly. Gobber pushed him away and held him by the shoulders, inspecting the skinny shape carefully.

"No, laddie-ye can't," he said quietly. "It's a dreadful hard thing ter do ter pull the trigger and end a life-and a harder one to live with, day after day with that stain on yer soul."

"I'm not a coward," Hiccup argued, tears shimmering in his bright green eyes. His breathing was hitching.

"Yer not a killer, boy," Gobber told him with a sigh. "In defence, maybe-but this would be in cold blood. That isn't who ye are."

"And Dad is?" Hiccup asked quietly. Gobber paused - then nodded.

"He has done many things ye know nothing about, lad," he revealed. "And some of them were pretty dark. He's a hard man and has done harder things. If needed-yes, he would kill his own brother."

"Dogsbreath is still at loose," I reminded them. "And he has access to a dragon..." They looked at me. "Look-they may both be boys, but do you want Alvin to have both Changewings?" Hiccup turned away and headed for the computer.

"Gobber-can you get the other Riders here now?" he asked shortly. "Where are you, Dog?" he murmured, interrogating the computer. "Location of Donald Harrigan?"

"Rider Harrigan is in the corridor to Pen One," came the automated reply.

"The way out," he murmured. "Gobber-I need your code now. I have to lock Spitelout out of Pen One!" The Colonel limped over to the console, stabbed in his code and pressed his hand to the scanner. Hiccup's hands flew over the keyboards and I wandered over to Toothless, standing by the Night Fury. The dragon gave me a worried croon and I nodded, absently stroking his nose. Hiccup was completely driven and I wasn't sure he was thinking straight. But even I was shocked how quickly he hacked the security systems. So, I think, was Gobber.

"Laddie?" Gobber murmured, watching his face harden.

"I've got his history," he said in a dead voice. "It confirms...everything. But he's locked everyone out of the external exit protocols. No one can override the command without rebooting-and that would allow him to escape." He jumped up. "I have to stop Dogsbreath. I need a weapon."

"Yer not rated," Gobber pointed out.
"Get me a gun!" Hiccup said through his teeth. I stepped up.

"No," I told him. "You are not rated to fire any sort of weapons, are not cleared and you simply aren't good enough yet, Hiccup. I won't let you endanger the other Riders and their dragons in your desire for revenge by letting you blast away like a lunatic with a pistol. You already have a weapon: you ride a weapon. No." He turned on me, his eyes glittering in anger.

"I am your superior officer!" he snapped. God, he was annoying when he was angry and had a point. But I had a better one.

"No, you hold a rank that enables you to lead the Team but does not qualify you for a weapon," I said levelly. "I am the only firearms competent officer in this unit, Hiccup."

"That's Commander Haddock to you, Lieutenant!" he sneered at me. I stiffened.

"As you say, sir," I replied tightly. "But, Commander, you still don't get a gun!"

"You can't stop me," he snapped.

"I can and I will," I told him firmly. "If necessary, I will declare you medically unfit to lead this mission. And don't think I won't do it-no matter what I feel for you. If I think your emotional state will cost lives, I won't hesitate-Commander!"

"I don't need your pity-or your dubious medial qualifications!" he snarled. Ouch. That was low. "You think our…relationship…means anything when these bastards are tearing BERK apart?"

"Not the only thing being torn apart," I muttered. "Think before you say or do something you may regret, Commander," I advised him tightly. "Before you do something irreparable."

"You think I won't just brush you aside, Lieutenant, if you try to stand in my way?" he shouted, his face tight with anger. His fists bunched. I tensed.

"You try and I will literally kick your ass, Hiccup." He glared at me.

"Just try," he challenged me and I sighed.

"Hiccup, I am not fighting you for this-it's ridiculous!" I told him. "You are behaving irrationally!" Wrong choice of words. It must have struck a chord from his past because his face locked into a mask of pain and hatred.

"You don't respect me," he hissed. "None of you do! I was a fool to think you were different…" I stiffened, suddenly winded at his words. This wasn't about respect-thought I did respect him far more than any of the others, I think-it was about doing the right thing. I loved him-but I couldn't let him have a weapon he wasn't qualified to wield and which could put the others in danger. And I was gravely concerned he wasn't thinking straight enough to lead the mission at all. And then he swung for me.

I ducked swiftly, instincts taking over and bouncing back on the balls of my feet as he swung again. He was still wild and I caught his hand with the third swing. He was surprisingly strong but I snapped his wrist back painfully and heard him gasp in pain. I forced myself not to wince at the sound: I never wanted to hurt him and I was using the minimum force required to repel his attack. He seemed to have no such compunction, wild and angry. Another punch brushed my jaw so I slammed my foot into his middle and shoved him back. I ignored his groan as he circled me, catching my foot when I slammed a kick at his prosthetic to knock him off his feet. He shoved me back but I rolled to my feet agilely. And they he threw himself at me-and I spun and threw him.
This was too much: we were going to do some serious harm at this rate. More accurately, I was going to do some serious damage to him. I grabbed an arm—his uninjured one—and wrenched it back, pinning him and driving my knee hard against his neck.

"I will break your arm if you don't calm down!" I told him angrily. "Hiccup—you need to get a grip. We have to get Dogsbreath before he runs. And you are our leader. For God's sake—start acting like it and not like a brat having a tantrum!"

He struggled for a moment, then lay still. I hated pinning him, using physical force against him because I knew what he had suffered. This was spiralling way out of control. Finally he lifted his head. "Alright," he said in a cold voice. "I accept—no guns. Now get off me, lieutenant. We have a traitor to catch!" I let him go and looked up—to see the shocked faces of the Riders, who had just entered. Hiccup levered himself to his feet and faced us with a scowl, his eyes hard chunks of emerald. I stood where I was, breathing hard and hurt by his tone. I wasn't sure what to do next—so I would act like a good soldier and see what happened. There was a mission to attend to. "There are four traitors in BERK," he told the Riders. "Dacre and Amund from security, Dogsbreath Donald and Colonel Jorgensen."

Eret looked around. "Where's Snotlout?" he asked.

"With my father," Hiccup said grimly. He met the shocked looks. "Yes, he wasn't killed. It was a deception designed to allow us to finally uncover the traitors. Dacre is dead, having tried to kill the Lieutenant and I on the firing range. Amund appears to have escaped. Dog is heading for Pen One—we have to catch him before he gets away. My father will deal with Spitelout."

"Poor Snot," Cami murmured. Hiccup turned on her like a shot.

"Poor Ozzie," he snapped. "Spitelout was the one who murdered him." He scorched his glare across the room. "Any more inane comments?" he growled. No one spoke. "Eret, Cami, Twins…and Astrid—you are with me. Fish, Gustav, Bucket, Mulch—guard the pens and visually account for all other dragons. With Spitelout playing for the other team, we cannot assume security is in fact secure and we may have visitors. He has already locked us out of the external control systems, though I have local override codes that can be punched in as a code red emergency measure."

"Do we have any way of delaying him, sir?" I asked. He looked at me coldly.

"Dragons," he said flatly.

"Is he armed?"

"Unknown," he replied.

"What force level is authorised?" He was glaring at my questions but I really needed to know what he was planning to do against a man on an acid-spitting dragon with a lead and possibly armed with the lethal Aurisdraconis darts—or even the Dracoradix that would send our mounts wild.

"Whatever it takes," he said grimly.

"Including lethal force?" I asked carefully. He glared at me.

"Yes," he said and turned to Toothless. "You have your orders. Get to Pen One—NOW! I will follow in a minute!" I cast Gobber a helpless look and then spun and led the Riders out. I heard the door shut behind me and bunched my fists. The Riders were all clustered at my back, eager to know what had gone down between us.
"Trouble in paradise?" Eret asked me smugly. I made a growling noise in my throat.

"Hiccup is very upset because he just watched the security footage of where Ozzie was shot by Spitelout," I explained quietly as we walked rapidly down the stairs and headed for the Pen level. "He's not thinking clearly. He wanted a gun-for which he is not rated or cleared."

"Oh, are there guns going? Can we have guns?" Tuffnut asked eagerly.

"I want one if he gets one!" Ruffnut added.

"No one but me is having a gun!" I snapped, my trank-gun securely strapped to my hip. "None of you have a sufficient rating to use one on a moving object with sufficient accuracy! And that includes Hiccup."

"Wow-harsh to your sister Riders, Astrid!" Ruffnut protested.

"So he looked like he was really mad," Cami commented as we began to jog along the long corridor to Pen One. "Are you dumped?" I scowled. I wasn't even thinking about that right now…but I really didn't want to be. Though the more I thought about it…

"Dogsbreath has been working with Alvin and Dagur," I snapped, getting them back on point. "He helped Heather get away with Blanche and Windshear."

"He was good friends with Dagur and Savage," Eret murmured. "I suppose we shouldn't be surprised."

"Though his security screen was clean," Cami put in. I shook my head as I picked up the pace a little. They were beginning to breathe hard.

"Yeah-performed by Spitelout," I growled.

"Wait-my screen was performed by Spitelout," Tuffnut realised. "Does that mean I am a traitor?"

"Are you working with Alvin?" Ruffnut asked him. He frowned.

"Butt-elf…can you see me doing anything involving that much effort?" he asked his twin. She rolled her eyes.

"Point taken," she conceded. "Hey, Astrid. Before you and Captain Fantastic there broke up, did you get to…you know…do the deed?" I put my head down and accelerated to a decent run, absolutely furious. I liked Ruff-as a weird, overfamiliar sort of friend of a friend—but I was not discussing my possibly-not-any-more relationship with Hiccup. She put her head down and managed to catch me up. The rest of the crew were panting hard-I had set a ferocious pace. "I just wanna know…if he's any good…in the sack!" she gasped.

"I am not talking about it," I growled, rounding the last corner and seeing the door of the largest Pen come into sight. I heard the sounds of something galloping toward us and turned to see Hiccup arrive on Toothless's back. He was still glaring, his gaze fixed on the Pen. He walked his dragon up to the door and pressed his left hand onto the pad. His access was granted and the team paused as the doors opened. And then it struck me and I pressed back against the door frame, grabbing Cami, who was nearest to me.

"BACK!" I snapped as a gout of acid came flying from Skyshimmer, the Changewing. Toothless gave a roar as his wingtip was tagged and the others all dived for cover. I stole a glance.

"Toothless-cover fire!" I snapped, pointing and Hiccup murmured at the dragon. A volley of three
shots blasted in the direction of the attack and I dived through, hunkering down behind a large chunk of granite. "Stormfly!" I shouted.

Suddenly, Toothless was at my side and Hiccup leaned forward, towards me. "Can you see him?" he asked in a low voice. I frowned.

"It changes colour and camouflage, doesn't it?" I asked in surprise. He nodded and stabbed his com. The others were shouting their dragons and they came ambling up. Then the door slammed closed behind us: we were trapped. Eret and Cami already had their dragons ready and I threw Stormfly's saddle on, leaping up and scanning the Pen for the Changewing. "Any clues on how to make it visible?"

"Make it move!" he shouted and I grinned at Stormfly.

"Spine shot!" I shouted and she unleashed a volley at the rocky wall where the camouflaged red dragon had been and was rewarded by another gout of the green hot acid. "THERE!" Dogsbreath Donald launched and swooped over the twins, shooting at them. They ducked and Toothless fired but their dragon was hit with a red dart. They shared a worried look.

Then Barf'n'Belch went crazy, leaping into the air and unleashing a huge cloud of noxious green gas that Tuff's head ignited with a mouthful of sparks. The ensuing explosion had us all ducking for cover and the twins whooping in delight.

"Yeah!" Ruff shouted. "Blow up something else, Barf!"

"I think you'll find, dear sister, that my head does the blowing up!" Tuff shot back, hanging on as the dragon dived and spiralled. "Whoa…about to lose lunch here!" I rolled my eyes. "Lookout below!" I glared up at the traitor.

"Donald Harrigan—you are under arrest for Treason!" I shouted at him. "Land and surrender yourself and your dragon!" Hiccup gave me a contemptuous look. "What? Someone has to say it. I know he's unlikely to…but we have to give him the chance. I think it's in the Geneva Convention!"

"I see you didn't listen to me!" Dogsbreath shouted back. "I told you he'd fuck it up!"

"Yeah, my gay boyfriend uncovered you and the rest of your little gang of traitors, fuckwit!" I shouted back angrily. "So who's fucked up now?" Hiccup stiffened and stared at me, his green eyes inspecting me closely.

"Astrid…" he murmured. His tone was confused.

"Oh, get over yourself!" I snapped. "Yes, he tried to put me off you with the 'did you know he tried a pass at Heather' and 'Hiccup and Dagur are at it like rabbits' lines, neither of which I buy. I will defend you to the end of the world, you moron, but I won't let you endanger us by having a hissy fit. So either man up or stand down!" I rolled my eyes. "Can no one on this damned team focus for more than a minute?"

"MOVE!" Eret shouted as the Changewing fired at us again. Hiccup and I split and our dragons screeched and homed in on Dogsbreath. He dinked sideways, spat acid at us and accelerated towards the main entrance.

"Please don't tell me he had the code!" Cami shouted at me.

"Um, I think he does," I muttered as Hiccup tried to cut him off but there was a horrible clunk and the unmistakable groan as the door swung open. "And computer nerd wasn't able to lock him out,"
I muttered under my breath. I knew it was unfair but I was still feeling sore at him for his behaviour. The dragon shimmered and his edges blurred as he zoomed through the widening crack. I sighed: Toothless had already accelerated after them and I signalled the rest of the team.

"After him!" I ordered. "He's not getting away!"

Then Barf'n'Belch attacked us and the explosion scattered us all over the Pen…
"Going somewhere?"

Spitelout looked up from his jeep, his hand tightening on the grip of his gun. He turned to face his brother and gave a thin smile as Stoick slowly walked forward.

"I have an urgent errand, brother," he said quietly. "I need to leave now-before things get out of hand." Stoick's grey-green eyes narrowed and he inspected the stocky shape of his brother closely. Spitelout was in cold weather gear and clearly on the brink of escape.

"I suspect they already are, Spitelout," he said directly. "If I asked why, would I get any sort of an answer?" Spitelout lifted his weapon and aimed it squarely at the General's head.

"Thanks for the tip on the Kevlar, brother," he said calmly. "Now I know where to aim."

"So do I get any sort of explanation why I am to be killed?" Stoick asked him, wondering where everyone was-and recalling that they were confined to quarters under lockdown. Spitelout cocked the trigger and his blue eyes grew cold.

"This isn't a Bond film where the bad guy explains the plot and then gets caught," he said sneeringly. "Suffice to say, none of us are getting younger and I need a pension."

"And your son?" Stoick asked quietly. Spitelout laughed.

"He's an idiot!" he scorned. "He was given ample chances to join me but he keeps blathering on about 'Uncle Stoick' and how he wants to be a hero, just like you." Spitelout's ice blue eyes narrowed. "I might have known, older brother: it was always about you, wasn't it? Your own child is a pathetic, useless weakling runt so you steal my boy for your own!"

"So you turn to Alvin and cause so much trouble? The injuries? The deaths?" Stoick asked. Spitelout narrowed his eyes and took one pace closer.

"He's right," he sneered, staring along the barrel of the gun. "We control weapons of unbelievable power and stealth and we should rule with them-but instead, we hide in a mountain and just foray out when corrupt politicians and businessmen tell us! Well, guess what, brother: I got a better offer!"

"You killed Ozzie."

"Dagur demanded it," Spitelout said easily. "He would have uncovered us too soon. But even with that, your little runt had to stick his nose in. Shame Dacre didn't finish him when he had the chance."

"He never had a chance," Stoick said faintly. Spitelout smiled.

"Never mind, when Alvin gets him, Dagur will really have some fun with him. You never believed him, did you? You never listened to your own son. And you dismissed your son's pleas and fears of traitors out of hand and told my men to interrogate him. But I watched on the monitors as they tortured your boy for the location of his dragon in this very base and erased the main tapes. It wasn't a civilised interrogation, Stoick, despite what I told you all-it was cold and it was brutal and it was very bloody. You even visited and shouted at the boy to give the dragon up and stop resisting, not seeing his bruises and his broken fingers and his pain. And all the while, Dagur was
on the base, breaking your boy, piece by piece. Beating him, whipping him, breaking his bones and his spirit. You know, I think he probably blames you for that? You were in charge. Is it any wonder he ran?"

"It's over, Spitelout," Stoick said quietly. "We know everything…"

"Then you know nothing!" The Colonel gave a smile. "Good bye, brother. At least everyone will be used to you being dead so there shouldn't be any worries when you actually turn up dead now."

"Drop it, Dad!" Snotlout's voice was steady but shocked. The young soldier emerged from the side of the garage, his weapon levelled and ready. Spitelout flicked his icy gaze to his brother.

"Son-put the gun down and we can work this out," he suggested. "You're a good soldier and I am very proud of you. Join me. I am your father-I know what's best for you."

"NO!" The young Rider's voice was shaken but his aim was steady. "You took an oath: you taught me to be proud of my unit, of my soldier brothers. You told me to honour my commanding officer."

"And then you ended up with his son as your commander-a weakling who stole your dragon and your place in command!" Spitelout's voice was ruthless. Snotlout stared at him.

"Hookfang is my dragon," he said evenly. "I don't want another dragon. I don't want command. Now lower your weapon, Dad: I can't let you go."

"Do you really want to shoot your old man?" Spitelout sneered, flicking his gaze to his son. "Lower your weapon and walk away, son. No one will ever know. This is between your Uncle and I." The young Rider raised his cool blue gaze and lifted his square chin.

"I'd know!" he declared proudly. He walked to stand alongside his General. "This involves me as well and all of BERK." He paused and his eyes hardened. "You are not my father!"

"Then this is so much easier!" Spitelout said as he fired. Stoick's weapon had swung up as well, firing at the same moment. And Snotlout was staring, the gun still reverberating in his hand.

Spitelout looked down at the patch of red blossoming across his chest. Two holes had punched through his uniform and his blue eyes widened and stared at his son one last time. "Good…shot…" he murmured as he collapsed onto his face. Snotlout stood motionless as Stoick's legs buckled as well, his huge paw rising to the red dart embedded in his neck. He swallowed and stared up at the shocked Rider.

"…Snotlout…" he breathed. The young man stared at him vacantly. "…infirmary…get me there…now…"

And he folded onto his face as well.

oOo

The Changewing only had a few seconds head start on Toothless but it was a fast dragon as well and very aggressive. Hiccup leaned low over the saddle, his hands clamped tight. His eyes were locked on Dogsbreath: one of his fellow Riders, one of the group who had never made him welcome, one who had joined Dagur and Savage in beating the Hel out of him multiple times until the others had defected. One who had been left in the unit to keep Alvin informed of everything happening and give him access to the dragons.
One who had tried to turn Astrid against him.

Strangely, that last fact made him more angry than the rest combined. He had come to terms with being their punchbag, being the outsider because that had been what he had practiced for so many years anyway through his miserable school career. The knowledge that he had helped Heather, helped Dagur get away, helped Ozzie's killer just made him lean further forward and accelerate past the Changewing. The dragon vanished against the greyish sky but Toothless had abilities that Hiccup hadn't let on, so he pulled the dragon's head back and shouted "NOW!"

Immediately, the dragon emitted a strange roar that reverberated round the valley and through the cloudy sky. Toothless's multiple ear flaps twitched and he turned his head to the reflected sounds. "Plasma blast!" Hiccup shouted and the Night Fury responded instantly to his Rider, the purple plasma striking the camouflaged dragon unmasked by the sonar location and sending it tumbling towards the glen below. Hiccup dived down after the dragon, seeing the Rider struggling to regain control. He flattened himself against Toothless's neck and dived beneath the falling dragon, supporting the falling creature. Then he heard the Changewing screech and flip over, claws raking at his and Toothless's flanks. He heard his dragon bellow and he felt the sharp slice of a superficial scratch-painful but not disabling.

"Hurts, doesn't it-Useless?" Dogsbreath sneered.

"Not as bad as what you did to us," Hiccup breathed, pressing a hand to his side: there was a smear of red on his palm and he groaned inwardly. Another scar for his expanding collection. "What did you say to Astrid?"

"The truth," he sneered, flipping his dragon round. Toothless followed him closely, staying out of range of the acid-spitting head. "You are useless. You've never had a girlfriend. Dagur is gonna have you-and he claims he already has…"

"I'm sure Astrid was impressed," Hiccup shouted. "Land, already. You can't hide from Toothless. You know he can always find Skyshimmer!" Dogsbreath's blunt features twisted into a cruel smile.

"Let's see if he finds anything for you now, Useless!" he scoffed and shot Toothless with a couple of red darts. Hiccup instinctively tried to block-and got one in his arm as well. Dogsbreath laughed and wheeled away as Hiccup frowned and dragged the dart out, letting it drop into the icy air. And then Toothless gave a ferocious roar and jerked away, wrestling with his Rider to try to get away. Hiccup gave a pained cry as his slashed left arm was wrenched and he was jolted side to side as the Night Fury fought for control.

Hiccup blinked, his vision blurring and head pounding. If he was ejected from Toothless now, he would fall to his death. So he hung on for dear life as the dragon wildly tried to throw him and the Changewing wheeled away to make his escape.

oOo

Stormfly gave an almighty squawk of indignation as she ducked under the explosion of Zippleback gas. Skullcrusher roared and leapt up to protect Cami's Hobblegrump which was cowering back. The twins whooped and cheered at their dragon being completely out of control. I muttered under my breath and rolled my eyes as I clipped my earpiece com in.

"I don't have time for this," I snapped as I watched the dragon's two heads start snapping at one another-a very weird sight with basically the dragon fighting itself! Ruff and Tuff were egging them on and swinging punches at each other. I drew my trank gun and, without hesitation, I shot each neck of the dragon and both of the twins. The other two looked at me in shock as their dragon
oozed to the ground and the twins gave a couple of obscenities and then collapsed to the floor by their unconscious dragon. I glared at them.

"Was that necessary?" Cami asked me carefully. I stared at her.

"Hiccup is facing the Changewing on his own," I reminded her. "The traitors have weapons which can drive your dragon wild and uncontrollable—or kill a human outright."

"Maybe you should have let Hiccup have a gun!" Eret taunted me. I scowled.

"He's just had his first lesson," I told them sternly. "He can hit the target some of the time-standing still on a peaceful range. How much use will he be in a dragon, doing crazy manoeuvres and losing one his his hands from flying the damned thing, hmm?" They both stared. "FINE!" I snapped. "I'll go after him alone!" And I kicked Stormfly into the air and we took off down the tunnel—as I heard them take off after me. But my eyes were fixed on the skies over the glen—and immediately I saw the tumbling red shape of the Changewing, with the black Night Fury diving after it.

"Intercept them, girl," I urged Stormfly and the Nadder arrowed towards the tumbling shapes. I saw Toothless get under the Changewing—and the red dragon slash at them, tagging Hiccup's side and Toothless's hip. Then I watched Dogsbreath shoot Toothless and Hiccup with something—and the dragon went wild, bucking and fighting. Just as he had done in that training exercise, I realised. Was that when they handed over the weapons? Was there where they passed the gun and darts that killed Ozzie and nearly killed me?

He had shot Hiccup as well. Would he be okay? Or would he…be as sick as I had been?

But he was trying to get away, leaving Hiccup wrestling with the Night Fury. "Help him!" I shouted and soared after the Changewing. I knew Stormfly was wicked fast because she had kept up with Toothless—and I knew how fast he had been clocked at. "Spine shots!" I shouted and the Deadly Nadder obliged me with a wide spread, three sticking hard into the Changewing's side and leg and two slicing through his wings. Dogsbreath gave a roar of frustration and swooped round, forcing his dragon to fire a gout of hot acid at me. I swerved but it dropped and melted a patch of granite, far below.

"New plan, girl," I murmured to my dragon. "Avoid the acid!"

Eret and Cami closed on Toothless and saw Hiccup sagging. He looked pale and weary, blinking rapidly. "You okay?" the corporal shouted and Hiccup shook his head.

"Tagged by one of the dragon darts," he slurred. "Feel…drunk…but not about to die, thank Thor. Toothless is the problem…"

"The LT has a trank gun," Eret offered but Hiccup shook his head.

"Not great for our relationship and the fall may kill me," he shouted back. "Where is she?" Cami pointed.

"Um…trying to outrace the Changewing's acid!" Hiccup's eyes widened and he grabbed Toothless's saddle and wrenched the dragon round in the direction of the Nadder's urgent screeches. He blinked and shook his head.

"With me!" he shouted. "Try to get above Skyshimmer and force him down!"

"What will you be doing?" Eret shouted at him. Hiccup blinked again, his head clearly still muzzy.
"Giving them a better target!" he shouted back and they accelerated towards me. I snatched a
glance over my shoulder and saw the Night Fury barreling towards us. Then a gout of acid missed
my shoulder by a fraction and Stormfly flipped us into a tight barrel roll. It was sort of exhilarating,
though if I had really wanted to do all these aerobatics, I would have chosen RAF not Army. But as
we were banking out, Toothless roared across us and I almost lost my grip on her. I muttered a
curse as the Changewing spat at me again and as we rocketed into a tight climb.

And then thunder rumbled.

I snapped Stormfly around, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. I could feel static
crackling in the air and I hadn't sensed any change in the weather. The only other time I felt
something like this…

There was a screech of a dragon above me and I dived down. DAGUR!

"HICCUP!" I shouted as a warning as we zoomed past the Changewing. Dogsbreath gave nasty
grin.

"My ride has arrived!" he sneered as I flicked round and fired a spread of spines at him, forcing
him lower. Eret on Skullcrusher was hovering over the Changewing and the armoured dragon was
relatively resistant to the acid as well. Toothless roared, fought Hiccup and flapped fiercely up
towards the lightning-swathed Skrill and the cackling figure perched on his back. Hiccup faced
him and his entire body was rigid with fury.

"YOU KILLED HIM!" Hiccup roared. Dagur gave a whimsical laugh.

"Is that what you're worried about, brother?" he scoffed. "Really?"

"Ozzie was your brother!" Hiccup shouted in a rage.

"He chose you over me!" Dagur sneered. "He had to learn that was the wrong choice!" He swooped
around Toothless, the Skrill hissing its hatred of the Night Fury. "So it's your fault he died!" I
cringed inwardly: Hiccup was already weighed down by so much misplaced guilt that this would
just be another hammer-blow to his confidence.

Toothless chose this point to lunge at the Skrill, his claws locking into the purple and grey dragon's
body and slashing at his soft underbelly and neck. Their wings fouled each other and they tumbled
wildly out of control. The Skrill roared and unleashed a huge explosion of lightning as Cami and
Eret surrounded the Changewing and forced him lower. I kept my eyes firmly on Dogsbreath,
making sure he didn't try to shoot anyone else: if he did, I would trank him and his dragon and
damn the consequences.

I heard Hiccup and Dagur screaming at one another, an exchange of threats and replies. Dagur was
promising to capture and torture Hiccup again and Hiccup was shouting that he would stop Dagur
by whatever means necessary. Obviously, there were more swear-words and far more dragons
roaring than that summary but as I snatched a quick glance, I saw the two dragons were still locked
and rolling in the air, barely able to maintain altitude. Toothless knew the Skrill couldn't blast him
while he was in contact, for fear of injuring his own Rider.

But why would Dagur come alone?

He wouldn't…

I flipped Stormfly round as the other, male Nadder swooped down from the clouds and made a
furious pass at me. I just missed being speared by its spines as a vicious volley whiffled past my
face. Simultaneously, Dogsbreath tried to fire his Dragon-Root darts at Eret but the little red darts bounced harmlessly off Skullcrusher's armoured hide. The Changewing then began to fade against the background, trying to escape, but Cami's Swiftsoar wrapped her neck around the Changewing's and her dragon clamped onto the red dragon. Trapped, the dragon couldn't vanish and it gave a despairing roar. Dogsbreath lifted his gun and tried to shoot her dragon but as they wrenched sideways and rolled, he shot his own dragon instead.

The Male Nadder zipped up in front of me and his claws slashed at Stormfly's chest. I let out a scream of rage as she screeched in shock and threw us into a tight roll, our claws clashing with his. As we rolled, I fired a trank at the Rider and he slumped in his riding straps, his dragon instantly breaking away from the combat. I turned back to Dogsbreath, who was fighting against his furious and out of control dragon, Cami had pulled Swiftsoar back, ducking to avoid hot acid that the enraged dragon was spitting at everything in sight.

The explosion sounded too close to us as we felt static wrap around us. The concussion wave wrenched Stormfly's arms but as we ducked, I saw a black shape tumbling backwards, Toothless's wings flapping wildly to try to break him out of the fall. "LOOK OUT!" I screamed as they slammed into the Changewing, the impact sounding a sickening crunch across the glen.

Skyshimmer gave a shattering shriek as a wing buckled and he began to spiral and tumble out of control. Toothless gave a pained roar as blood welled from a deep slash in his back leg from the spines on the wing where they had impacted. Hiccup was thrown sideways, dangling hopelessly over a huge drop, suspended only by his prosthetic where it was clipped into the saddle and tail assembly. His face was a mixture of fear and pain as his stump was abused by the sudden abnormal pressure of supporting his entire weight. As I watched, Toothless dinked sideways and Hiccup's hands managed to lock onto the saddle and he pulled himself back on.

But Dogsbreath was thrown from the saddle and began falling, screaming, to the ground below. I didn't hesitate and neither did the others: we all dived to try to save him. The tumbling Changewing fouled our approach and the others got in my way so I accelerated past them and flipped round Skyshimmer, trying to reach for Dogsbreath. But Hiccup was quicker, Toothless forced to dive, though he was roaring and protesting still.

"Take my hand!" Hiccup shouted, sticking his hand out for the falling traitor. But Dogsbreath rolled away from him. I dived below him but he punched out at me. My eyes widened: this was insane.

"Stormfly-fetch!" I shouted and my dragon rolled, trying to snatch at the falling man with her claws but he raised his gun and I heard the click: we rolled back as he gave a nasty laugh.

"See you in hell!" he shouted as he spread his arms wide and we had to pull up to avoid crashing into the rapidly approaching ground. I looked away but I was sure Hiccup was watching as Dogsbreath slammed into the ground. I gripped the saddle tightly as the thud died away and we flapped up away from him. Skyshimmer crash-landed a few yards away and the fierce red dragon gave a pathetic croon and scampered over to the body, giving a few pathetic nudges and whines. I blinked hard: it was sometimes easy to forget that the dragon was innocent in all this.

"BROTHER!" Dagur roared from overhead. "LOOKS LIKE IT'S A DRAW. YOU DON'T GET DOG AND WE DON'T GET THE DRAGON!"

'DAGUR!' Hiccup's voice was furious as he fought against Toothless. "THIS DIDN'T HAVE TO HAPPEN!"

"I DISAGREE. THIS WAS FUN. WE MUST DO IT AGAIN SOON, BROTHER. BUT DON'T
FEAR—I WILL HAVE YOUR DRAGON AND I WILL HAVE YOU!"

Then he flapped up into the clouds, the Nadder with his unconscious rider at his side. I glanced across the group: Hiccup was glaring furiously at the retreating traitor, his face tight with rage and hatred; Toothless was still fighting against Hiccup; Skyshimmer was grounded with a damaged wing and desolate at the loss of his rider; Skullcrusher and Swiftsoar were exhausted from restraining and corralling the Changewing; the twins and their dragon were tranked in the Pen and Dogsbreath was dead.

I patted Stormfly and wondered how I was going to shepherd this lot back into the base. Then I shook my head as I saw the grieving dragon and the body of his rider.

"No winners," I murmured.
"Yer failed!" Alvin's tone was accusing. Dagur folded his arms and scowled: his dragon had been injured by the damned Night Fury and Hiccup had escaped—though he was clearly delightfully bruised from his encounters with Bludvist's men. His heart pounded a little faster as he fantasised over the chance to spend more time with the lanky rider in the near future and add his own wounds to that enticing skinny body—but he forced himself to pull his attention back to the huge and irritated shape of Alvin.

"Actually, I would say Dogsbreath failed," he said coldly. "But he won't be making that mistake again!" Alvin shook his head and sat back heavily in his huge leather chair.

"I can see bein' yer friend or family ain't a safe place ter be!" he commented thoughtfully. "The rest of our agents also seem ter 'ave failed me."

"Not all," Heather said calmly, walking up to stand by her brother. She flashed him a small smile. "Amund has returned with the news that he has installed all the failsafes we wished before they were uncovered."

"And what Bludvist asked?" Alvin's eyes narrowed.

"His plan is complex but I think we can achieve it—provided they buy our story," Heather told him.

"My sis is the brains of the family," Dagur said proudly, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"No, that was Ozzie," Heather said quietly as his expression darkened.

"Don't mention that name again!" he hissed. She blinked and then smiled.

"Dagur, baby—you need to chill," she reminded him. "We have their base set up the way we want and they will now think they are secure…until we remind them that we have absolute control of their destiny. And then we take what we want."

"The Night Fury…" Alvin breathed, she eyes gleaming at the thought of the payout. Dagur's fists clenched so his knuckles showed white. He gave a sadistic grin.

"Hiccup."

I can't lose you

oOo

It was much later and the entire team had submitted reports of their encounters, much to my satisfaction. Mine had taken ages because I seemed to have been in this whole mess from the beginning. The Changewing, Barf'n'Belch and Toothless were being cared for by Bucket and Mulch: the two oldest riders had come from a career in animal husbandry and had a way with the dragons. They also helped out as Veterinary techs so I knew the casualties would be in safe hands. I had visited the infirmary and Major Gothi had filled me in on the General: he was stable, his respiratory system was holding up well and his EEG was satisfactory. He should make a full recovery, even though he remained in a coma: Snotlout had got him help in time.

Snotlout was being looked after by Eret, the twins, Cami and Mulch, who had managed to smuggle a shed load of booze in and had got Snot utterly wasted. It was probably the best thing that could happen to him tonight: tomorrow, he would have to face up to what had happened, to what he had done and who he had done it for. I had seen him in the infirmary before they ushered him away and
"You were right," he had mumbled as he had turned back to his vigil over his Uncle—as the others arrived to take him away and distracted him. Hiccup was there was well, seated by the bedside and holding his father's huge hand. I gathered it was what he had done for me when I was in here as well. But he had blanked me on his return from the glen when we had finally made our way back to Pen One and had ignored me when I approached him in the infirmary as well. He had blinked rapidly then looked away, focussing his entire concentration on his father. Yesterday, I would have persisted, but now I really wasn't sure where we were anymore. I began to doubt everything he had told me about his past, his feelings, his sincerity and I was feeling angry and hurt. And I was not going to be rejected three times.

So I left the infirmary after checking my next few shifts, went back to my room and turned my computer on, playing whatever miserable tunes I could find in my music library. I flopped onto the bed, stared at the ceiling and kicked off my shoes. My head was buzzing and I felt kind of empty. Sure, we had found and sorted out the traitors and notionally, BERK was now secure—though our enemies were still out there—but I had no idea what had happened with Hiccup. He had gone nutso on me when he wanted to go after Dogsbreath with a gun. I rolled my eyes: it was probably my fault, for convincing him that he was capable to learning to shoot. I mean, I knew he had emotional baggage—about a hold full!—but I wasn't going to put up with that kind of anger towards me. If he was in a relationship with me, he had to treat me with respect. I sighed and, playing with my braid as I had done when I was unhappy as a little girl, I realised why I was so upset: I was falling in love with him and this was a horrendous brake on the whole possibility of being with him.

I changed for bed, tidied everything away and cleaned my teeth. I was just fishing out my e-reader and trying to recall where I had been in my book when I heard a tap on the door. With a sigh, I got up and went to the door, opening it and seeing—as expected—Hiccup. He was looking more dishevelled than usual, his auburn hair very messy and green eyes downcast. He was still very bruised and he chewed on his split lip anxiously. "Yes?" I said more sharply than I had intended, standing in the doorway and not inviting him in. He needed to make the first move. He swallowed. "I-I wanted to—to apologise," he said quietly. His eyes flicked up to look into mine and they looked ashamed. "I shouldn't have behaved like that. I-I was mad…madder than I had ever been…because I had just seen my own Uncle murder my best friend. And…and you were stopping me going after him and Dog with everything I could use to stop them!"

"Which was the right thing to do," I reminded him. "You weren't qualified or capable of firing while flying and you would have been a danger to all of us!" He huffed slightly.

"I was upset," he repeated like it was justification.

"And I was supposed to be your girlfriend," I told him shortly. "You blanked me, Hiccup. You treated me like a stranger. Like…nothing. You said…some pretty cruel things. You actually tried to hit me…"

"You kicked my ass," he shot back at me. That wasn't the point.

"You don't do that with someone you respect, you care for!" I told him sharply.

"You didn't respect me!" he shot back, his voice hurt.

"It was never about respect, you moron!" I growled. "I actually respect you a heap, Hiccup—and you damned well know that. But you were behaving like a macho idiot, wanting a gun." I rolled my eyes. "Urgh! You're just an ass like every other guy! You behave badly and then suddenly it's
'sorry, babe-I was upset'. Like you should be allowed to hit someone or shout at someone or be abusive to someone just because you're upset. Well, it doesn't excuse bad behaviour and total lack of self-control. IT NEVER DOES!

And I slammed the door in his face, walking back to my bed and feeling tears well in my eyes. I really hadn't understood how upset I had been until he started with the lame excuses. An aunt had been in an abusive relationship—and every time something bad happened, there had been those pathetic excuses—never any responsibility, never any acknowledgement that there should always be minimum standards of behaviour, never any acknowledgement that hitting a partner was never acceptable. And he was my only real friend here and he had just…blanked me. I threw myself onto the bed and buried my head in the pillow.

There was a tiny tap on the door.

"GO AWAY, HICCUP!" I shouted.

"Astrid," came the muffled words through the door. "Please, let me explain. I-I would never hurt you. I wouldn't hit you…"

"You tried to punch me!" I snarled.

"You challenged me to a fight!" he replied, his muffled words puzzled. "I-I know it was the wrong thing to do and you whipped my ass. But please…let me explain!"

"I said GO AWAY!" I shouted. There was a pause.

"No," he said softly.

"I will call security," I threatened. This was getting annoying.

"I have my own cell," he told me quietly. "Got my name on it and everything. They even refer to 'Hiccup's cell'."

"This isn't a joke, Hiccup!" I snarled.

"No, it's not," he pleaded through the door. There was a pregnant pause. "Astrid, you know I've been physically and emotionally abused for most of my life. If you thought I was abusive to you, then I am more sorry than I could ever say because I would never want to hurt anyone like I have been. I would never want to hurt you. Ever." He paused and his voice wavered. "Please…shout at me. Set me punishments. Hit me, if it will make you feel better. Just…please don't reject me. I-I can't face that. I can't lose you…" His voice broke and I heard his ragged breathing. I warily sat up and walked slowly to the door. I paused, glaring at the blank surface.

"Hiccup-I can't do a relationship with someone who will do what you did today," I told him. He heard him swallow. "I really like you. I-I am falling in love with you…but if you don't respect me, then it means nothing. If I even see a hint of that again, it's over."

"I-I understand," he breathed.

"I didn't even know you had a temper like that," I said warily. "That could be a problem."

"It won't be," he promised softly. "Say-say what you want me to do and I'll do it, Astrid. Anything. I don't want to be that person I was today. He was…everyone I hated. Everyone who hurt me in the past. Gods-please don't let that be me."
"If you're angry or upset, Hiccup-you gotta talk to me," I told him sternly. "None of this I have to do this myself crap!"

"Th-thank you," he murmured thickly.

"You aren't a killer, Hiccup," I told him shortly. "You were angry but when you were faced with the actuality-you nearly killed yourself and Toothless to try to save him."

"I-I know," he said brokenly. "I'm a d-disappointment all round."

"Hiccup-that is one of the reasons why you are getting another chance," I told him gently, resting my hands against the door. "Because you are decent and you are kind and despite today's ridiculous outburst, you did the right thing."

"I-am so gr-grateful…and so-so sorry…" He sounded as if he'd been crying. I sighed and opened the door-to see him sitting curled at my feet like a homeless child curled in a doorway. His head was down, his arms wrapped around his legs and he looked utterly pathetic. I dropped to a knee by him and he blinked then looked up. His eyes were shining and his cheeks were wet: God, did I have this amount of hold on him?

I know he is my only real friend but he…he has no one else either. I gently lifted a hand and ran my fingers through his messy auburn hair.

"Dragon Boy, you don't do anything by halves, do you?" I sighed. His bright green eyes looked up and he seemed utterly desolate. He stared at the floor again.

"I'm sorry," he said again, hunching his shoulders. "Please…if you want to, you can h-hit me…I deserved if, after all…" And my heart clenched in such keen pain at the pitiful offer. I would never hurt him because I knew how much he had suffered in the past. I grabbed him and pulled him into my arms. He froze for a moment…then buried his head in my shoulder. "I am so sorry," he whispered. "Please don't reject me…" I pressed a kiss onto his cheek.

"You donkey," I murmured. "What the Hell are you doing on the floor?" He looked up.

"Um…I was going to stay here until you forgave me…or until you had to step over me and leave the room," he murmured in a really embarrassed voice. "If I had to sleep at your door, I would have, Astrid, because at least I'd be near you. Tonight…I couldn't be alone," His voice broke. "I watched him kill Ozzie. Gods, I watched it twice! And it was my Uncle, my kin…" He closed his eyes. "Of all the things I've had to endure, that was pretty much the worst."

That hit me hard as well as I pulled him to his feet and helped him into my room. He was stiff and awkward as he limped in but once I had closed the door, the gentle, hesitant kiss he gave me was very shy and sweet. I understood now how raw he was from the revelations and his involvement in Dogsbreath's death. And I knew he blamed himself for the loss—even though Dogsbreath had chosen to die. It was easy sometimes to recall how badly he had been treated throughout his life and how little resilience he had to some of the real crap we had been through recently. He wasn't a soldier and today, I wished I wasn't one either. He needed warmth and comfort—and so did I. I could feel him trembling and I pulled him onto the bed, curling up with him snuggled against me, his head buried in my chest and arms around me. "Mutton-head," I murmured.

"Deserved that," he said softly. "I meant it…about hitting me…I mean…if…if you feel you want to…" I kissed the top of his head.

"Doofus-I am never going to hit you," I told him firmly. "You have a problem, you talk. Sometimes you argue. But you never get physical. You never treat the other person like an inferior. Your should try never to be cruel. You come to an agreement and talk things out. And
sometimes honesty is painful and difficult to face but it is essential if this is going to work. And I want it to work…my Dragon Boy…” He sighed and snuggled harder against me. There was a long pause as he took a deep breath and he tightened his grasp on me.

"Astrid?” He paused as I shifted slightly. "I…love you," he sighed. I gave a little smile. Here, now, with him beside me, I was ready to say the words.

"I love you too."
I woke when Hiccup tried to turn over, fell out of bed and dragged the covers off completely. I groaned and unsympathetically tried to haul them back on while he floundered on the floor. It didn't work because he was completely tangled in the sheets so I sighed and sat up.

"Hogging the blankets already, I see," I commented dryly.

"Maybe you should get a double," he shot back.

"Hey, Dragon Boy-at least wait until we've been dating a week before moving in with me!" I teased him. He lay back and paused.

"So…five days to pack, eh?" he murmured with a smile. I threw a pillow at him.

"You're not that cute, Dragon Boy!" I scoffed. He sat up and gave me his best puppy eyes.

"Aren't I?" he asked with a smirk. He really did have stunning green eyes and when he wasn't totally angst-ridden, he was pretty damned hot. But the sight of a grown man making puppy eyes at me just made me burst out laughing and he joined in, collapsing forward. "Okay, I surrender," he chuckled, then ran his fingers through his auburn hair—not only messy but now officially wild. Then he offered me a hand. I caught it and he pulled me close and pressed a light kiss on my lips. "And good morning, Milady."

"Morning, babe," I murmured. It was actually a pretty nice way to start the morning. I glanced at my com: it was time to get up anyway. "I suppose we ought to make a move…" His fingers gently stroked across mine as he continued to hold my hand. He looked serious.

"I really am sorry," he sighed. "I was utterly Useless yesterday." I shook my head.

"No—you were still pretty awesome in uncovering the traitors and fighting Dagur and Dogsbreath," I commented, "but you weren't thinking straight and that is dangerous." He nodded.

"You said something that I really need to act on," he admitted. He slowly got to his knees. 'Man up or stand down'. My father is in a coma. My Uncle is dead. Gobber hates command. Gothi has never commanded except in the infirmary. And I have the next highest rank. So, like it or not, I have to step forward and keep the Base going." He winced as he got to his foot, then strapped his prosthesis on. 'I'll be back in half an hour, if you want breakfast?' I nodded. "And wear your uniform: we need to demonstrate that everything is normal." I smiled.

"Yessir!" I grinned and ripped off a textbook salute as he limped to the door and turned back to me for a second.

"Astrid? Thanks," he said as he left.

He collected me bang on time—and he was showered, shaved and his hair was as neat as it could manage—still choppy and a little wild. He looked pretty neat—I suspected he was in his best clothes-skinny black jeans, dark green button-down shirt, black waistcoat, black boot—and I felt underdressed in my uniform. But he grinned and chivalrously offered me his arm, which I accepted with a smile and he walked me down to breakfast.

The other Riders were there, subdued at the loss of another of their number and I could feel the impact of low morale on their group. The twins were talking normally, not bickering and even
Bucket and Mulch seemed to have lost their good humour. Fishlegs looked on the verge of tears. Hiccup insisted we sat with them and we slid in at the end of the table, nodding to them and tucking into our meals with gusto. I passed Hiccup my toast and he grinned and bit in, nodding thanks as I concentrated on my eggs and bacon. The other riders were looking frankly disappointed that we appeared to have patched up our differences; a soap opera would have been much more amusing, I guessed. Hiccup patted my arm and then rose and limped to a solitary figure sitting to one side of the Mess, toying with a plate piled high with an untouched breakfast.

I watched Hiccup quietly sit down opposite his cousin and speak quietly and calmly. Snotlout was by turns snarky, angry and sad and throughout, Hiccup was calm and passive, allowing his cousin to exhaust his emotions on him, pour out his feelings to someone who could possibly understand. Finally, he leaned forward and stared into his eyes. He spoke for a couple of minutes, quiet words I didn't pick up but which made Snotlout stare at him, wide-eyed. And then he nodded.

"Thanks, cuz," was all I could hear. I felt really proud of my boyfriend and then I rose and walked over to Snotlout. He looked warily up at me. He sighed. "I suppose you're gonna tell me I did the right thing," he said defensively. Hiccup looked up at me, surprised. I granted him a quick glance before turning my gaze back on Snotlout.

"No, though it was the right thing," I told him calmly. "But I wanted to say that losing someone that close is very hard. You will always wonder if there was something different you could have done. And you will always think about the things you wished you had said but never got round to. He was your Dad, Snotlout. He always will be. Remember what you loved about him, the happy memories and things will get better." I paused-this was getting personal. "Both my parents died in a car crash when I was sixteen so I know how hard it is to lose them suddenly. Unexpectedly."

"You didn't kill them," Snotlout told me shortly.

"They were driving to collect me from Army Cadet camp," I told him softly. "So they did die because of me. All I'm saying is you will work it out, Snotlout. And if you need anyone to talk to about what you are feeling-I'm happy to listen."

"Over dinner, Princess?" he asked me hopefully. I rolled my eyes.

"With your table manners? Urgh-I'd rather eat with Stormfly!" I shot back.

"Hey-I just shot my Dad! I need special treatment!" he protested. I cast Hiccup an exasperated glance and Snotlout took a deep breath and a flash of insight briefly coloured his voice. "And you guys are an item, aren't you?" I nodded. He sighed. "You know I'm not going to give up until you realise I'm far better than Captain Useless!" he told me. I caught the edge to his voice and realised he was putting on a brave front.

"Yup-he's cured," I announced and winked at Snotlout, then patted him kindly on the shoulder. "You keep telling yourself that, Snot," I grinned. The others watched us as we walked back to the table-followed by Snotlout who slammed his breakfast down and tucked in. Tuffnut looked up hopefully.

"You realise we're all traumatised as well," he said hopefully. "So maybe…"

"No-you're all on dragon dung duty," Hiccup told him flatly.

"Awww…c'mon…" Ruffnut whined. Hiccup looked up with a stern glare.

"Did you want it for a week or a month?" he asked them. Cami stared, shocked.
"Did they shoot you with something?" she asked with a frown. He cast her a look and polished off his toast.

"Only a shot of realisation that BERK is in disarray and that I need to step up. That we need to step up," he said thoughtfully. "After breakfast, I want all the base staff in the main garage. Gobber has already informed the others—I said I would let you guys know so no excuses. Then you will go and feed and groom your dragons. Spend some time reassuring and petting them—and no—you are forbidden to blow anything up, Tuff."

"Low blow, dude!"

"Then at 11:00, we will meet in the seminar room and debrief on the Oil Refinery, the kidnapping and rescue and yesterday's incidents. Those of you who haven't yet submitted reports for your participation in those events have until then to get them written and logged. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," Eret said clearly, giving a nod. It was noticeably less fun than goofing off all the time but a lot of bad things had happened and perhaps BERK needed to be run with a little more discipline. He nodded to the others and they rose to put their plates away. I smirked as I settled opposite Hiccup again.

"My work here is done," I said but he reached over and his hands found mine. There was suddenly uncertainty in those green eyes, his facade of calm and confidence cracking.

"I can only do this with you, Astrid," he admitted in a low voice. "You make everything look so simple, so obvious. Like talking to Snotlout…"

"You were doing fine," I assured him. He sighed.

"Snotlout has bullied me and treated me badly for years," he admitted. "And so, to be honest, had Spitelout. It felt…weird…to be there. offering him my support and comfort when a tiny piece of me almost felt like he deserved something horrible to happen to him. And then I felt like an utter bastard for even contemplating that thought when I should be—and was—really sorry for him."

"Karma," I murmured. "No, I was thinking the same thing. But I know—and you sort of do as well—how horrible it feels to lose your father. You did well—and you helped him." I finished my coffee. "Now what about this meeting in the garage?"

"It's the only place large enough to get almost all the staff in," he admitted. "Apart from Pen One—but as that is full of dragons, it may not be the wisest choice."

"Good thinking!" I grinned as we made our way to the garage. He was walking taller and his expression was more concentrated as we entered and he went to stand by Gobber. I wandered over to stand with the Riders. For a moment, he looked panicked and then he found me and beckoned me over. Almost all the staff were there and all groups were represented, from security to medical, domestic to catering, IT to ordnance, engineering to admin. Reluctantly, I stood forward and stood at his side, blushing with all those eyes upon me though with my chin high. He took a deep breath and addressed them.

"You are all aware now that my father, General Stoick Haddock, has been shot and is in a coma in the infirmary," he began, his voice loud enough to carry over the assembled staff. "He was shot apprehending Colonel Spitelout Jorgenson, former Head of Security, who was working with external forces to betray us. Two of his staff and Rider Harrigan are also traitors. All but one of them are dead." He paused and saw shock and fear in their eyes.
"BERK is now secure," he told them firmly, praying he was right. "We are now secure. And the traitors are all gone." He swept his clear green gaze over the anxious faces. "Damage has been done to us-but we are resilient. We will repair and rebuild. We are guarding the most astonishing and amazing find in the history of the military. We cannot allow our dragons to be taken from us, to be corrupted and used for evil. Security will make our base safe: we Riders will protect you. And we will hunt down and end those who seek to do us harm. We are here to protect those who need us. You will not fail them. We will not fail them!"

There was whooping and cheering-mainly from the twins, though Gustav and Cami joined in. And a ripple of applause started and ran through the crowd until everyone was clapping.

"Until the General is back on his feet, Commander Haddock will run the base with me," Gobber called out. "Do yer best. BERK will prevail!"

Hiccup swallowed and blinked hard as he took the applause, bowing slightly. His expression showed gratitude-but also that he was overwhelmed. Finally, Gobber roared "DISMISSED!" and they dispersed. I grasped his hand and found he was trembling.

"You okay?" I whispered. He nodded.

"Just thinking what my father would do," he murmured. "Um…lotsa pressure, actually."

"You do remember you're not Stoick the Vast?" I asked him. "Be Hiccup. AKA Commander Dragon Boy. Don't be your Dad—because you'll always be second best at being him. Be you—the best you that you can be." He nodded and paused, frowning, his eyes focussed somewhere in the middle distance.

"I was just thinking as well…if I was a traitor with full access to security and it was likely I would be discovered…would I just throw my hands up and go 'it's a fair cop'? Or would I leave some nasty surprises and a backdoor in for my friends?" I stared into his troubled face.

"I think we both know option B is the correct answer," I told him. He grabbed my hand. hauling me towards the elevator.

"I hope Gobber hasn't tidied up Dad's office yet," he murmured.

He hadn't and the computers were all still there. I stole a glance at the door to the General's quarters, almost expecting him to walk out as Hiccup settled at the screens and used Stoick's code to slide into the security systems. He immediately called up Spitelout's history, disabling every trap and pitfall the man had laid to cover his tracks. Hiccup had far better IT skills than his Uncle and had spent five years getting to know the entire system from top to bottom and had written a good portion of it. I nipped out and fetched coffees, then wandered back via the infirmary, ensuring Gothi knew where I was. She had been at the meeting so she knew what my newest additional role was going to be and she indicated my shift had been moved to the afternoon. I thanked her, then delivered a double Americano to Hiccup as he finished his investigations.

"From what Ozzie sent to me—which you copied—and from what I can gather from what Spitelout, Dacre and Amund have done, the system is booby-trapped and rigged to admit them and open the external door to Pen Seven," he told me as he sat up and stretched his cramped back.

"Pen Seven has an external door?" I frowned. He nodded.

"We keep it as a failsafe in case of fire, to evacuate the dragons," he admitted. "But it's in a smaller pen so would be relatively easy to overlook." He pulled up a list of actions the traitors had
programmed in. "If they activated this, life support and environmental systems would go down, electricity would be cut and the external entrance would be opened. In a word: chaos. They would sweep in and take the dragons and whoever else they wanted." He sighed. "And it would be by a very simple external command." I stared at him.

"Can they do that?" I murmured. He nodded.

"I'll have IT install the upgraded Firewall Ozzie and I were working on," he said heavily, "and I will take all of the disabling functions out of the malware." Then he smiled quietly. "However, when the Firewall detects the activating code-which I have from the programme-we can rig a trap for them."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked. "Your fiercest dragon waiting to eat them?" He sighed. "If only. The are gentle creatures that only attack you if threatened. But we can alert security and the Riders and activate the back door. We can also dim the lights and cut air-con temporarily to the pen area only simulating the success of their programme, while deadlocking all the Pen doors. They will think they have their way in-until they find themselves trapped in a pen with no access to any dragons or the base." He gave a grim smile. "And they can answer to me."

oOo

Later, after a surprisingly uneventful and smooth briefing session and a quiet but actually pleasant lunch, the Riders went to do their physical training and I headed back to the infirmary. Gothi gave me a smile and set me to more trauma simulations and I enjoyed the familiarity of working through medical scenarios rather than battling for my life with enemies, traitors and dragons. My grades were down a little but I took the feedback on board and the second set of simulations were far my best to date in BERK.

At the end of the shift, I stopped to look in on the General. He was stable-but still in a coma and his EEG had shown no deterioration. The shape I was expecting was sitting at his side. Hiccup's skinny shape was bolt upright, his hand on his father's huge paw, his pale face turned to the lax features of the General. He looked tired and uncertain.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he said in a heavy voice. "I'm not the leader your are-and I'm not the son you wanted. I guess...I'm just a disappointment. I'm trying-Thor, I'm trying-to do what you would, run the base effectively while you are ill and make sure they are all safe but I'm not sure how you do it. I mean-there are only so many hours in the day and Gobber keeps dumping more and more papers and reports on me to sort out. And he and I are covering the head of security post because Spitelout isn't here either."

He paused and his voice lowered. "I am sorry, Dad. I know he was your brother and you were close. His betrayal must have been a knife to the heart. Snot and I...aren't that close...but I can see how much he is hurt and you were even closer to Spitelout." He paused and his grip tightened. "We got them. Three dead and the other gone. Their back door-the damage they inserted in our systems-is gone. I wonder if they thought killing Ozzie would stop him uncovering it-but they forgot about me. Everyone forgets about me."

He sighed. "Except Astrid. She's...amazing, Dad. She's always there for me and she says all the right things at all the right times. She's got a temper and boy, does she kick my ass if I get out of line...but honestly, I deserved it. Yesterday, I was so scared I had blown it with her. I was so stupid, letting anger get in control that I forgot to listen. I wanted revenge to the exclusion of all else, forgetting the safety of my team, my friends, my dragon. Gods-I almost became like Dagur! I was a fool. She stopped me being a dead fool. I probably don't deserve her but I thank Odin I have
her, every minute of the day." I blinked: it was such a sweet, such a touching thing to say that I felt ashamed I had overheard it. I almost backed away as he squeezed his father's hand.

"Come back soon, Dad," he murmured. "And I'm sorry. I'll try not to disappoint you again…"

His eyes widened as the squeeze was returned, weakly but definitely. I narrowed my eyes and looked closer as Hiccup stared at the huge shape on the bed. Stoick's eyes cracked open a slit and he took a rasping breath.

"Not…a disappointment…" he wheezed. "Proud…you are…my son…" He lifted his arms slightly and Hiccup hugged his father fiercely.

"Welcome back, Dad," he breathed in relief. Then I heard a bleep on my com and I frowned. Hiccup looked up and saw me and gave an embarrassed grin while Stoick managed a very faint wave to come closer. I nodded and gave a smile, inspecting my com as I walked in. Hiccup caught my hand and pulled me close as I frowned. "What is it?" he whispered. My eyes widened.

"It's Heather!" I breathed, showing him the message. I couldn't believe my eyes. "She says she's just come to in Alvin's base and has no idea what has been happening. The last thing she remembers is being captured over the glen during that exercise-and then nothing until now. But she is offering to stay where she is for the moment and feed us information." Hiccup stiffened. His eyes met mine and he looked troubled.

"Can we trust her?" I asked.
Can we trust her?

Hiccup stared at me for a long moment and shook his head. "I don't know," he murmured and peered at the message. His green eyes flicked over the words and I could see him analysing the phrases: when she had been back in the base after her capture, her manner had been...off. Hiccup and I had both seen it and been suspicious. I didn't know her that well but he probably did.

"Who knows her best?" I asked. He shrugged.

"Ozzie. Dagur."

"Neither of whom are likely to answer any time soon," I said and regretted the flippant comment. He winced but gave a resigned shrug.

"Eret," he added. I frowned. Heather's boyfriend-who had also noticed she had been behaving weirdly and who had mouthed his apologies for her treatment of me. Then I nodded though something was nagging at the back of my mind.

"Do you want me to speak to him?" I asked. He paused then shook his head.

"We'll see him together," he decided. He turned to look at his father: Stoick was barely awake, his eyes closing as he struggled to remain conscious. "Dad...I need to see Eret, to get an answer..." Stoick gave a small smile, his large face with the full beard unused to such a subtle expression.

"Let her stew," he murmured. "If she's honest, she'll understand your qualms. If not, she may start pressing. It's a big decision..." Hiccup leaned forward and hugged him again.

"Glad you're back, Dad," he murmured as Gothi appeared at the door. I nodded as Hiccup and I left and the General was surrounded by his worried medical attendants. He murmured into his com, requesting Eret to meet us in the Base Commander's office. Then we paced up the corridor and his hand automatically found mine. I looked up to meet his tired green gaze.

"You may want to ask Cami and Ruffnut as well," I suggested. He rolled his eyes at the suggestion of the female twin but my next words stopped him. "There is a girlie friendship thing they have that means they actually spend time together. And I think Cami may well have more insight than you guess. Even...Ruff...though she seems currently very interested in our sex life." He froze and turned bright scarlet.

"Wh-what?" he gabbled, his mouth working but no sounds coming out. "You...I...we..." I started giggling. I couldn't help it: he looked as horrified as an adolescent being told that parents have sex.

"I refused to say anything but she did start asking after you apparently dumped me yesterday!" I warned him.

"When you kicked my ass," he added carefully, realising he was in dangerous waters. But I had forgiven him and nodded.

"And then some!" I shot back with a smile. He visibly relaxed. Then he groaned.

"Oh Thor-please don't tell me that Tuffnut will be asking me the same thing?" he moaned. "Shoot me now!" I punched him lightly on his good shoulder and smiled.

"After you've spoken to Eret," I suggested. He nodded, squeezed my hand and we walked more
slowly to the General's office. He was staring at the floor for a long time as he walked and I could tell, from the way he walked, that he was feeling very self-conscious again. The fact his face had almost caught fire when I mentioned sex told me all I needed to know. I squeezed his hand and he glanced up, looking embarrassed. "Don't worry," I whispered loudly. "It doesn't matter. Everything will happen in its own time." He shook his head.

"Useless," he murmured quietly and opened the door to the office. I followed him but as soon as the door closed, I grabbed his hands and pulled him to face me, standing close to his stiff shape and staring into his ashamed face.

"Look, you are the only person I want, Hiccup-so don't go overthinking everything again!" I told him gently, feeling his discomfort. His shamed green eyes flicked up to inspect my face. "If all I wanted was a boyfriend who had slept with everything in a skirt, I wouldn't have punched out Snotlout!" I squeezed his hands with an I can't believe I just said that look and he gave a small shrug.

"Hmm," he murmured. "Actually, that happens more often than you think." He stared into my face and looked defeated. "I really don't deserve you."

"Actually, you're the only one who deserves me," I told him sternly, battling against years of utterly shattered self-confidence. "And when the time is right, everything will fall into place." I sighed. "Talk to me, remember?" He smiled slightly, then leaned his head against mine, his breath gentle on my skin.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Though we've gone off point again." I started and heard a small chuckle. God, this place was infectious! And he was laughing at me. I huffed at him as his fingers curled around mine and then he reluctantly led me over to his father's desk, pulling up a chair for me and leaning against the desk himself. A knock sounded at the door and Hiccup invited him in. Eret marched in and saluted. Hiccup waved him to stand at ease, still clearly uncomfortable with the whole military protocol thing. He paused, inspecting the larger man for a long moment, then nodded.

"Astrid has been contacted by Heather," he said without preamble. Eret stiffened, his brown eyes darkening with hurt. His face tightened.

"When?" His voice was level but only just. Hiccup paused; he could understand the man's worry for his girlfriend.

"About half an hour ago," he said and gestured. I lifted my com and displayed the message for him. He scanned it twice and his eyebrows tightened.

"No." he said. Hiccup frowned.

"Why?" he asked calmly: this was why we called him.

"Because she didn't call me," Eret told us simply. "I love Heather and if you had just woken and found yourself somewhere very strange and very hostile, would you call your boyfriend or an officer you barely know?"

"A good soldier would call his commanding officer," I reminded him and then I stared at him. "But, frankly, none of you here are good soldiers. Not even Heather." He stared at me for a moment then shrugged.

"Point taken," he sighed and I actually felt sorry for him. It was plain he was very fond of her and
her absence and betrayal had really hurt him. And his words made sense of the nagging wrongness I had felt at receiving her message. I didn't know her: we had only met up socially after she had been abducted and so she wouldn't have recalled that event.

"So she's probably still working with Dagur and Alvin," Hiccup said quietly. "So we take what she says with a grain of salt."

"Pinch," I murmured. He glanced at me. "We use more salt this side of the pond—even in metaphors."

"But if she is trying to trap us, then we can work out what they are planning because they assume we don't know about their backdoor and booby traps," he continued, his lips quirking in a smile. "And we can see if we can get her away from them. Gothi and the team should have analysed if anything was in her system to see if we can really undo what they did to her."

"Unless she made a choice," I murmured. They both glared at me. "Sorry, guys, but we have to consider that eventuality, no matter how unpalatable it may be."

"I won't give up on her," Hiccup said firmly. Eret glared at him, his expression suspicious. "She's Ozzie's sister: he believed she wouldn't ever choose Alvin's side. I promised I would get her back."

The Corporal awarded him a curt nod and Hiccup sagged. "Do NOT tell any of the others, please?" he asked Eret. "I need to work out what to say to make her believe that we believe her." He rested a hand against his temple.

"Don't say anything too much," Eret suggested. "Heather is very bright and naturally suspicious. Just say what you would say if you were taking her up on the offer or speaking to her over the com. Don't mention me. Don't say anything more than you said to me. Play to her vanity and take her up on her offer." I nodded.

"I'll reply in the morning," I said quietly. "We'll come up with a response between us." I looked at Hiccup and he nodded.

"We'll run everything past you because you know her best," he told the other man, his expression determined. "I promise you, Eret—I will do everything in my power to save her." The man stared at Hiccup for a long moment, then nodded.

"I understand," he said gruffly. "I saw how you tried to save Dog even after all he had done to you. I know you'll do your best." He nodded and walked out, leaving Hiccup sagging on the desk. He looked exhausted. I leaned by him.

"You need something to eat," I reminded him and he sighed.

"You go ahead," he said and rocked to his feet. He was wincing slightly as he put pressure on his prosthesis and I looked into his tired face. It was easy not to recall how much abuse he had taken and I grabbed him round the middle and snuggled close.

"I'll bring you something," I offered but he shook his head. "Get some rest," he advised me gently, his hands sliding down my back. "I'll see you later, Milady." He managed a smile and I stole a small kiss before reluctantly pulling away.

"You need it more," I told him quietly. "You're not going to be much use if you're exhausted…" And I instantly regretted my choice of words because I saw him bow in resignation. He had been called Useless for so long he believed it. "Dragon Boy—you are doing a great job—but you have been through a tougher time than any of us. And if you don't rest, you'll be too worn out to do your job—"
and your Dad's…and Spitelout's…" He sighed.

"See you later, Milady," he repeated as I walked out the door.

oOo

I knew he was right about food and relaxation. So I went for a run, showered and grabbed a light dinner before heading for the rec room and finding Cami and Ruff arguing about which of the Riders would make the best boyfriend. I slid in by them and grabbed a camomile tea as Cami inspected me.

"Boyfriend?" she asked.

"Hiccup-obviously," I told her with a grin. She rolled her eyes.

"Just…why?" she asked. I sipped my tea.

"Let me think…kind, caring, cute, intelligent, dorky, brave, determined…"

"Gay?" Ruff suggested hopefully.

"Not gay," I said firmly. "Very definitely not gay." Cami raised an eyebrow.

"Has he…?" she asked. I stared at the floor.

"Only snuggling so far…but he's a really good kisser," I admitted. "Snores a bit but he's really comfy to sleep on…" Ruff's eyes popped and I thought she might have a fit.

"You guys sleep together?" she choked. I laughed at her dismay as Tuff, Gustav and Snotlout wandered in and began playing pool loudly. "You and Count Dorkula?"

"How many insulting names have you got for him?" I asked slightly sharply. Cami grimaced as Ruff frowned, missing my annoyance and then lifted her hand to begin ticking names off.

"Useless, Captain Useless, fishbone, toothpick, dork, nerd, geek, dork again, Count Dorkula, pegleg, hop-along, gay…"

"…and we're done!" Cami interrupted quickly, seeing my face and elbowing Ruff sharply. "Look, Astrid-we respect you're with him and we can see he's trying really hard to step up. And to be fair, he's actually sorted out the traitors, secured the base and got us functioning more like a proper unit." She looked at me. "Though you had something to do with that?" I shrugged.

"So who do you guys fancy?" I asked, deflecting any more discussion.

Interestingly, they suddenly became really coy but I gathered that Ruff sort of had her eye on Fishlegs which surprised me as he seemed rather nice and quiet while she was crazy as a bucket of frogs and more indiscreet than anyone I knew. Cami was more open in admitting she enjoyed spending time with Snotlout (!) Gustav and Tuffnut and I sighed. Not even discriminating! And I allowed myself to relax and just treat them like friends and comrades because they were good fun to chat to about nothing of importance. When they invited me, I didn't hesitate to join them for the pool tournament (Snotlout beat Fishlegs in the final though Ruff and Tuff were disqualified for cheating) and I have to confess that I had a really fun time. Sure, they were loud and outrageous and rude and sometimes cruel about my boyfriend-though they quickly learned I wouldn't accept that- but they were also fun and carefree and able to relax utterly.
It was only when I glanced at my watch that I realised how many hours had passed and that I hadn't heard from Hiccup. I knew he wouldn't have eaten and worried he would have worn himself out. I waved goodnight to the others and leaned towards my com.

"Location of Commander Haddock," I murmured.

"Commander Haddock is in the Base Commander's Office," came the reply and I sighed. He hadn't moved since I left him—had obviously been working on some of that paperwork he told his Dad about. I headed directly there and let myself in to see what I suspected: his lanky shape slumped over a pile of dossiers, his head buried in his arms. He was snoring softly. I walked quietly up to him and peered over his shoulder. He was asleep on Eret's personnel evaluation. Gently, I laid my hands on his shoulders and began to massage.

He jerked awake as I accidentally massaged his stitches and he winced. He sat up abruptly and stiffened until he realised it was me. He sighed. "Ow," he whined, cracking his neck and blinking sleepily.

"Serves you right for sleeping on the job—and not taking your own advice!" I told him unsympathetically though I slid my fingers through his hair and massaged. He gave a little sigh.

"I've been trying to do these evaluations," he admitted, "but I kinda got stuck on Eret. I mean, how do you put that he's tried punching me twice in the last couple of weeks? That he's been absolutely massacred by you twice for mysogynistic and inappropriate remarks to a senior officer."

"You don't," I told him gently. "You walk away and in the morning, you sit down, rewrite the whole thing, reread again and finally finish it." He looked up at me and leaned back against me.

"How do you know?" he asked wearily.

"Most junior rank of commissioned officers? Gets dumped with all the crappy jobs? Team evaluation goddess!" I told him. "If Eret is a problem, what're you gonna say about Snotlout?"

"Not. He's my cousin and I'm feeling too sorry for him to be objective. You're doing his."

"THANKS. I'll kick your ass for that!" I growled, massaging his stiff neck. He gave a little sigh.

"Can't wait to do yours. Highly aggressive and very violent tendencies!"

"Efficient, professional, supportive."

"Bossy, far too frank to senior officers bordering on rude…"

"Hopelessly fond of one-legged dorks…"

He jerked round and wrapped his arms around my middle, staring up into my face with luminous green eyes. "My favourite Rider," he said quietly. The affection was dripping from his voice and brilliant in his eyes.

"You better believe it, babe," I told him, kissing him on the head. "Now, you are coming to bed with me because I need my pillow!" He levered himself stiffly to his feet, with a sigh.

"Is that all I am to you?" he complained, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as we headed tiredly for the door.

"Hot water bottle?" I suggested. He tightened his grasp around my shoulders.
"I know my place," he sighed as we wove out into the corridor and locked the door behind us.

oOo

He woke me early with a kiss, nuzzling against me until I blearily cracked an eye open and stared up into his face. His eyes were sparkling and he looked excited. He pressed another kiss onto my forehead and then I rocked my head to kiss him on the lips. "Morning, Milady," he murmured after a long breathless moment.

"Hiya babe," I yawned. "What time is it?"

"Early," he said but his eyes were glinting with excitement. "Get your flight suit and meet me in five back here. I wanna show you something." I stretched and yawned hugely.

"What?" I yawned.

"Get up, get up, get up!" he urged me excitedly, shaking me like a kid and I smiled at his sudden enthusiasm. Warily, I scrambled up and dragged myself back to my room, hauling on my thermals, my flight suit and grabbing my weapon, my coms and helmet. I strode back to Hiccup's room, knocked and walked in-to see him finally in his flight suit. And I gaped.

His suit was jet black, fitted perfectly to his lean and lanky form, his bruised face and messy auburn hair topping the high-necked suit. There were subtle grey markings across his chest and he smiled at my expression. "Dreadful, huh?" he said with self-deprecating humour. "I look like a total…"

"Hottie," I murmured and he blushed scarlet. He walked to me and grasped my shoulders, staring deep into my eyes.

"You are beautiful," he told me earnestly. "And I have something to show you. Come with me…"

We headed to Pen One and picked up our dragons. Toothless was ecstatic to see Hiccup and the Night Fury capered and bounced like a puppy. He was purring loudly and I smiled at his happiness to see his Rider. Hiccup was hugging him ferociously and his face was filled with joy at spending time with his best friend. Stormfly was equally delighted to see me and I petted her adoringly as I saddled her and swung into the saddle. I pulled my helmet on and checked my coms as Hiccup mounted up and looked up at me. His helmet was customised and had small spines on the crest that mirrored the small ridges running along Toothless's spine. His eyes were sparkling as he nodded over to me as I fell into my 'follow the leader' slot. "Follow me," he murmured over the com. "We'll be going fast."

We launched out of the tunnel to the shadowy predawn glen and swooped in the cold sky then arrowed east and hugged the ground. Stormfly was happy, stretching her wings and keeping up handily while Toothless was slicing though the air like a knife, the whistle of his wings soothing. Hiccup leaned lower as we accelerated. "What's the hurry?" I called and he paused.

"I wanted to get you there at dawn," he admitted as we climbed over the shadowy hills and then scorched east again towards the pink sky, the horizon definitely golden now. "I hope we haven't missed them."

"Missed who?" I asked as the coast came into sight. We were facing a wide inlet and there was an island ahead…

"The Black Isle," he said, slowing and he swooped down, circling rapidly and checking the area was free of casual observers before landing on a dark rocky outcrop that camouflaged him...
perfectly. Stormfly touched down by him and he unclipped his leg from the tail apparatus, then clambered from the saddle. He pulled his helmet off and ruffled his auburn hair then looked as I landed by him. I pulled my helmet free as he wrapped an arm around me and pointed.

Below us, in the Bay, a pod of dolphins was playing-leaping and diving and just having fun. There were a dozen of them, smooth grey backs with dorsal fins bobbing through the golden waters as the rising sun turned the bay to fire. A dolphin leapt directly in front of us and I could see its apparently laughing face as it clicked rapidly and Toothless crooned back. The dolphin landed agilely and dived, then shot up and leapt again, doing a back-flip. Toothless gave a little barking sound and Stormfly echoed it. The dolphins leapt again, their clicks answering the dragons' calls. More dolphins began to join in, leaping in pairs and calling to our dragons and I snuggled closer to him.

"Are-are they communicating with the dolphins?" I asked. He nuzzled my hair.

"It seems so," he murmured. "Toothless loves coming here and the dolphins always arrive when they hear the sound of his wings to talk with him. Looks like Stormfly can talk to them as well. That's really fascinating as it speaks of a shared ancient heritage and means of communicating which can tell us…"

"Shut up, Dragon Boy," I murmured and pulled him into a deep kiss. It was a very effective means of shutting him up and an even nicer way of enjoying the view. Finally, we came up for air, his face goofy with astonishment. I smiled at him in amusement. "I have something to show you? That's one of the lamest, oldest pick-up lines in…forever!" I scolded him. He flushed scarlet and stared into my eyes.

"You-you didn't think that I-I was trying to…" he stammered and face-palmed. "Gods. You must think I'm…"

"The sweetest, cutest dorkiest reddest Dragon Rider I know," I murmured. "This is the best date ever. You deserve double points for this one!" He stared at me-and his face lit up with astonishment.

"You're letting me take the lead?" he realised with a slow smile. The sun gilded his hair and brought out the copper highlights and his smile was radiant. I couldn't help grinning back.

"Only until I manage to arrange some non-lethal social engagement that matches this!" I murmured, kissing him again. "Though that may be a challenge…" He gave a smug little smirk and rubbed his nose against mine.

"Are you ready?" he said in a quiet voice and I nodded. I lifted my com and tapped in the message I had discussed with him last night. Eret had commed that he agreed with it as well.

\textbf{Hi Heather. Stay put and feed us what you can. Stay safe and if you need extraction, call. Astrid.}

I pressed SEND and glanced up at Hiccup. His hand was curled gently around my waist as the send acknowledgement registered. Then we turned back to the dolphins. They were still leaping and playing in the dawn light as I felt my com buzz. I peered at the screen: she had been waiting for my reply.

\textit{They are going to attack the base in a few days. Before then, there is a plan to attack an economic summit in Birmingham tomorrow.}

Hiccup frowned. "Why would Alvin attack an economic summit?" he asked. I stared at the dolphins and sighed.
"I don't think he would," I murmured, running the contents of the files through my head. Alvin was hiring dragons out to the highest bidder. And Stoick had already mentioned another player…someone who wanted power and wasn't afraid to use any means. "But I think that Drago might." His eyes widened and could see the fear seep in. Then he nodded.

"I think we need to get back," he said reluctantly. "Somehow, we need a plan to prevent them causing chaos in a city of a million people…and not being seen…” I sighed and tightened my arms around him.

"Somehow, they always manage to spoil it," I muttered. He pulled me close.

"Nothing is gonna spoil this moment," he promised me, kissing me again. "Milady."
Hiccup got the remaining IT team to get him everything on the Summit while he and Gobber analysed the message with Eret. I filled in the General when I checked in for my shift at the infirmary and Major Gothi took me aside and asked me to review an ECG and some cardiac enzymes. Both were diagnostic of an acute coronary syndrome—a heart attack. Then she showed me the name: General Stoick Haddock. I stared at her in shock and checked the date. Yesterday. She nodded.

"As a result of the stress of the *Aurisdraconis*, he has suffered a moderate inferior infarction. He has received full thrombolysis but did not require acute stunting or bypass. Myocardial function is already back to 85% of his norm. He’ll make a full recovery but he won’t be back on duty for about three weeks. Minimum."

Her eerie mechanical voice didn't convey the emotion in her eyes and the tremor in her hands: she had known him for a long time and she was as worried by this news as his son was going to be. And then it struck me: poor Hiccup. He would have to keep shouldering his father's duties and wrestling with being something he was never trained for and never sought.

"You want me to tell him, don't you," I said tonelessly. "You know we're in a relationship?" She nodded. Her eyes told me that she thought I was the best one to do the deed. I nodded. "Okay," I said, breathing hard and suddenly horribly apprehensive. "But I need to know what they gave Heather. What is there in the tox screen? PLEASE! I need to have something to give to Hiccup to give him something to work with..." Gothi nodded and scuttled to her office, then returned with a printout and a sheath of papers. I scanned them and frowned: they had found some chemical in there that they didn't recognise and I guessed that it was something Hiccup could work with. It may even get him out of those stupid evaluations. I looked up but she shooed me away: I had a job to do.

I found Hiccup in Gobber's office with Eret, debating what Heather meant. "Attack the base in a few days but an attack tomorrow in Birmingham? Misdirection? Or a double bluff?" Hiccup was saying, pacing. His brow was furrowed with a frown and his hands clenched and unclenched. Eret had sat down and folded his arms, a scowl on his face. Gobber was rotating his hook absently.

"They want us in Birmingham," Eret stated obviously. "The UK one, not USA, I presume."

"The Summit is being held in the UK..." Hiccup said tonelessly then glanced at the computer screen. "The Finance Ministers of the G20 countries...the people who fund BERK's counter-terrorism portfolio...are meeting at the Convention Centre in the City Centre. Just amazing. Smack bang in the centre of a heavily occupied conurbation."

"Lots of collateral damage possible," Gobber admitted.

"High levels of casualties as well," I added. They all frowned. "Dagur isn't especially discriminating in what he blows up, is he?" Hiccup shook his head. "The Convention Centre is less than a mile from the absolute centre of the city with a theatre, the main city library, the Indoor Arena, the Symphony Hall, the War memorial, Town Hall, Gallery and a number of very large hotels in very close proximity...not counting over a hundred bars and cafes all round the canalside..." They stared. "What? I've been there with a friend for a weekend!"

"Oh gods," Hiccup groaned. "This is sounding better by the minute..." He looked at Gobber. "So we're talking about an area packed with people, businesses, restaurants, eyes and cameras and 300
miles away as the dragon flies—or 400 by road…”

"Rail," Gobber corrected him. "We'll take the train."

I gaped. "What—we take them to the station and buy them tickets?" Hiccup managed a small, knowing smile.

"No—we have our own train," he explained, beckoning me closer. I frowned but drifted towards him. "Theoretically, we could fly down but the further south we go, the more people, radars and cameras there are. Also, the dragons would get tired…well, Meatlug would… So we take them down by specially modified freight train until we're close to the centre of action. If we have notice and solid intelligence, we can take the tunnel to mainland Europe and travel anywhere…"

"You are full of surprises, Commander Dragon Boy," I said with a smile, ignoring the looks Gobber and Eret gave us. He leaned close to me and smiled.

"I try," he murmured, then blinked and remembered where we were. "Ah-hem. I mean…I… gods…” He flushed and Gobber started guffawing. Even Eret was smiling at Hiccup's discomfort. I gave a small smile.

"So do we follow this tip?" I asked. Hiccup sighed.

"I don't see how we can't," he sighed. "If they are attacked and we aren't there, we're screwed. If they are attacked and we fail, we're screwed. So unless we stop it and succeed, we're screwed. They will pull the plug on us-after denying they know anything about us, of course."

"Yer Dad had ter fight very hard to sell the idea of dragons as counter-terrorist equipment," Gobber revealed. "It wouldn't take much for them ter drop us."

"And then maybe some rich philanthropist would step in to finance us and preserve the dragons?" I suggested. "Maybe the owner of the Bludvist Foundation?" Hiccup flinched and he unconsciously grasped his left arm, feeling my stitches under his protective grasp.

"Or those trappers they used on Heather could be set up in the zone around the Summit?" Eret suggested. "They could just have a shopping list…Night Fury…Nadder…Rumbehorn…?"

"The good thing about dragons is they can perch somewhere high," I murmured. "Top of the hotels, on top of the Rotunda, roof of the Convention Centre…"

"Toothless has echolocation," Hiccup added. Eret, Gobber and I all stared at him. "Okay—it was our secret. It was kinda fun being able to vanish and always find you guys in hide and seek…"

"Absolutely no fun allowed," I said sternly and he sighed.

"Yes, Milady."

"You are so whipped!" Eret commented.

"You wanna argue with her?" Hiccup asked him pointedly. Eret raised his hands and backed away.

"Last time she was gonna throw me in the brig for a decade so…no…"

"Gothi has identified a chemical in Heather's system from her hair and blood samples that only appeared when she was kidnapped and since," I reported, interrupting their banter. "It would seem from its hydrophilic nature and relatively small molecular size to have a relatively short half-life in
the body so it must be being administered frequently or continuously. Its source is unknown but probably because no one has done a full search…I think they kinda got distracted with everything else that has been going on…" I looked at them. "If we can identify the isomeric dominance and its biologic properties including neurochemical interactions, we should be able to find an effective antagonist…"

I was met with a sea of blank stares. Hiccup raised a hand slightly. "Er, Astrid…I think you may have gone seriously technical on us…" he suggested warily. I blinked.

"Search it online, computer whizz, find out what it is and where it comes from and then we could find an antidote!" I translated and there was a collective sigh of relief.

"You really are a doctor, aren't you?" Eret asked. I nodded.

"Almost," I confessed. "Pending Finals results." Hiccup wrapped his arms around me.

"I'll start on the search after this meeting-once Gobber is organising the transport down to Birmingham and liaising with the local and national security services to ensure we are allowed to help out without being shot at," he promised me. I wrapped my arms around him.

"And I need to talk to you," I told him and I felt him stiffen. Eret nodded.

"I've got to get back and check those idiots haven't blown up Pen Two," he muttered. "I heard the twins making a bet with Snot in breakfast so I may already be too late…"

"And I need tae have a word with the Transport Officer," Gobber added, catching my expression. "C'mon, Eret-I think these two need space." And they left, almost at a run. The door slammed and the room was silent.

"Oh gods, you're dumping me," Hiccup said suddenly. I stared into his stricken face and shook my head.

"Completely wrong, doofus!" I told him gently. "But Gothi asked me to talk to you. About your Dad." He blanched and his green eyes widened in horror. I could feel him start to tremble and I tightened my grasp around him. "He's suffered a small heart attack as a result of the attack-coupled with many years of poor diet, too much alcohol and too much stress."

He pressed his eyes closed and flinched, his face a mask of guilt. "It's all my fault!" he moaned, trying to curl up. I wouldn't let him go as he struggled, trying to pull away…trying to get away. "Let me go! It's my fault for causing so much stress, of being such a useless, disappointing son…" I was practically wrestling him now and I managed to get him into Gobber's big chair, almost pinning him as I leaned forward, seeing tears streaked on his cheeks.

"No," I said sternly, my voice filled with command. I had to get him believing me. "His job is stressful. Running this base has been incredibly stressful. The traitors have caused immense stress. And his brother's betrayal and attempting to kill him-twice-must have been the final straw. This wasn't you, Hiccup. It was never down to you!"

"It's always my fault!" he stated with obvious self-loathing. I wanted so much to slap him at that moment but though I felt my hand stiffen, I knew it was the one thing I had promised never to do because I was scared: he was sometimes so emotionally fragile that a betrayal like that could shatter him. So I did the next best thing: I lunged forward and pressed a desperate kiss onto his lips. His eyes popped wide and then, after a heartbeat, he kissed me back, desperate and desolate. His hands clasped the sides of my face and held me close until finally, we broke apart, breathing
hard. His green eyes flicked up to inspect my face and read my concern for him. I leaned close to him, my voice even.

"You didn't choose for him to be in counter-terrorism, for him to get your mother killed and for him to abandon you essentially to a lifetime of bullying and abuse. You didn't ask to be hauled halfway round the world to the middle of nowhere. You didn't betray him. You still love him—though you are angry at him as well. But you didn't cause this. He's done this to himself over years."

"I—I know…" he murmured, pressing his face into my shoulder. "But I have been such a disaster…"

"He told you he was proud of you, you total dork!" I snapped back, stroking his hair. "He is out of danger, His heart is working well and he should make a full recovery with no disability. But he may have to give up those ghastly whiskies…" And there was a hint of triumph in my voice. He glanced up and I smiled at him. "But it means that you are going to have to be in charge for a bit longer. He's got at least three weeks before Gothi will allow him to resume command."

"Don't worry," he reassured me in a resigned voice, his panic calming. "I'll be Commander Haddock, once I walk through that door. I'll be what I have to be and keep the base running." I ran my fingers through his hair and smiled.

"Just don't forget what you are best at," I told him, searching his defeated expression. "You are the leader of the Dragon Riders and the best IT person they have here. Learn to delegate those jobs you can. Get Gobber to do all those stupid reports he dumps on you. Run the search for Heather's chemical yourself—because you are far better at that than anyone else. Get Snot, Eret and I to help organise the mission…"

"…get my Lieutenant to do the team evaluations…" There was the smallest quirk to his lips now.

"I hate you," I stated. He kissed me again.

"You don't mean that," he said with more confidence.

"I'll just kick you in bed," I grumbled. He hugged me tighter.

"Give me the data and I'll run the search," he said quietly, "while you help prep the mission. We'll brief at three in the seminar room. Could you organise the team?" I nodded. He kissed me again. "Lunch at one, Milady," he reminded me and I grinned then pulled away.

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely. "Um…worst 'breaking bad news' ever." He gave a forgiving smile.

"Kinda jumped to conclusions myself," he admitted.

"Still…" I began but he rose and took my hand, pressing it to his lips gently.

"Astrid—you are the only person I would want to hear that from," he assured me. "And you're certainly the only person who could have calmed me down after that news." He smiled again. "I'll let Gobber know—he may want to go and gloat over Dad…" I sighed.

"I'm not sure Gothi will approve," I sighed as I went off to do the evaluations.

\oOo

I caught Snotlout after lunch and pulled him aside. His face tilted into a cocky expression and he
gave a self-confident grin.

"Finally decided Captain Useless won't cut the mustard?" he asked. "I gotta tell you I am waaay bigger and better in the sack than that scrawny…"

"One track mind, deluded and sex-obsessed," I murmured. "Got it-fantastic summary for your staff evaluation-which I am doing straight after this meeting. Anything else to add, sergeant?" He scowled.

"How does he do it?" he complained. "I mean he's a scrawny toothpick who falls over his feet and can't even talk in a sentence without saying something stupid and I am just…perfection!" I frowned.

"No, you're not," I told him flatly, "but you have the next best firearms rating in the unit after me and I think you will be able to perform to the level required." He looked confused. "I'm offering you a gun for the mission, Snotlout. You and I are the only ones with sufficient rating. But I wasn't sure if you wanted one-because your last experience with a gun was a fatal shooting."

"My Dad," he said quietly. I hesitantly put a hand on his shoulder and nodded.

"I know-but we needed to give you the choice," I said. "It's your decision, though." He pulled away, folded his arms and his blue eyes grew thoughtful.

"Thanks," he said in an unexpectedly insightful voice. His fists clenched and he remained motionless for a long moment. Then he shook his head. "But no thanks, babe. I ride a weapon and Hiccup will look after me just fine." He flipped me a salute. "I won't let you down, Astrid."

I watched him walk away and felt mildly unnerved: just when I thought they couldn't do something to surprise me, they did. "Hmm. My summary will also need to read shows occasional signs of maturity and insight," I added and headed back to finish the reports.

The train was prepped and ready to leave at ten thirty that night. They had to co-ordinate with the passenger traffic on the main west coast line and overnight travel was the best option because nothing else was moving at that time. The briefing had been short and on point: observe from designated high points when the Summit came into session and park up in an isolated siding until needed. Not to attack or break cover until Hiccup gave express instructions and to listen to everything he commanded. And to remain in uniform and helmet at all times when with our dragons to avoid detection.

We all had to walk our dragons down through a long passage from the Pens to the basement level where the train was readied, all in our flight suits with warm weather coats, hats and gloves-including Hiccup, who had picked his up (under protest). The carriages all had blankets and bins of fish for the dragons as well as shovels and hermetically sealable bins for any dragon dung. I had also insisted on food, fluids and necessary facilities for the Riders because no one had actually considered that we might need feeding as well.

The train looked like a standard intercity model, mimicking the main operator's livery but with the 'windows' of the carriages were blanked. The engine was already humming—an advanced modified diesel model because not all lines are electrified—and about twice as powerful as a normal model. It would be pulling four carriages, all appearing like passenger coaches but in fact all were freight capsules for the dragons and their riders. Hiccup, Toothless, Fishlegs, Meatlug, Stormfly and I were in the first; Snotlout, Gustav and their Monstrous Nightmares were in the second; the twins
and their Zippleback were in the third (Hiccup explained no one else was allowed in their coach because they always blew something up) and Eret and Cami with their dragons Skullcrusher and Swiftsoar were in the final coach.

Gobber, Gothi, Ragnar, Bucket and Mulch were seeing us off—an impressive sending off party if I ever saw one. Ragnar handed me a full medical box—just in case—and Gothi hugged me. Hiccup was almost crushed by a very extravagant hug from Gobber and the Colonel patted the boy on the cheek happily. "Make us all proud, laddie!" Hiccup hugged him back, then turned to his team, checking they were all there. He flipped his com on:

"All aboard!" he called and the doors slammed—and then, to the roars of dragons, we pulled away. The double doors of the 'station' opened and we pulled out into the cold night and sedately made our way out of the glen and round the winding branch line. We would be travelling at a very modest pace until we hit the main line to Glasgow and accelerated. Hiccup checked his tablet and sighed. "Only another seven hours to go," he murmured quietly, then yawned.

"Tired?" I asked. Toothless crooned and gently rubbed against him. He nodded, rewarding his dragon with a fresh salmon then giving a huge stretch.

"Early start…but it was worth it," he admitted with a smile. I gave Stormfly another rub and a quick cod and she turned round then settled on the floor of the carriage. Toothless snuggled close to her and Meatlug gave a little rumble and settled down, her big yellow eyes fixed on her Rider. Fishlegs was looking a little anxious and I smiled at him. He managed a watery reply.

"Erm, am I going to feel like a wallflower?" he asked worriedly. I gave an apologetic smile.


"You two are kind of cute," he admitted. Hiccup's head snapped round and he blushed. "So, can you go over the plan again before we go to sleep and I try not to cringe…" Hiccup winced.

"Fish!" he protested. "We won't…er…be doing anything cringeworthy…"

"Awww…" I protested playfully and was rewarded by both of them blushing. I snuggled up to Hiccup and his arm snaked round my waist. "I was really hoping for cringeworthy…"

"And I suddenly need to go and see…Gustav!" Fishlegs squeaked and left almost at a run, leaving me giggling uncontrollably. Hiccup glanced at me and rolled his eyes.

"He's a good guy," he reminded me. "They don't mess with him because he's well, big but he's quiet and not one of the extroverts in the group. He loves Meatlug and would have her sleeping in his room if he could. I've caught him sleeping in her pen more than once."

"That's not in his record," I said, having reviewed it that afternoon.

"No, I never reported him," Hiccup told me simply. "Why should he be penalised because he loves his dragon?" I rested my head against his chest. The guy had dumped Hiccup and isolated him before I arrived but Hiccup had already forgiven him.

"Told you you're a good man," I murmured as he steered me towards our chosen sleeping place—at the far end by our dragons. We fixed our blankets and pillows and then shed any items we wouldn't need to sleep. My coms, gun and boots went into the soft sack hanging from the wall and Hiccup also removed his coms, boot and prosthetic, then slid into the little nest. I shimmied down beside him and he wrapped himself around me, my head nestled into his chest. He gave a little sigh.
"You do know that you'll have to face Dagur when we get there," I reminded him and I felt him flinch, his grasp tightening around me. "You okay?" I asked, lifting my head to inspect his ashen face. He closed his eyes.

"Not sure," he admitted. "I'm sure I'll feel better when I'm on Toothless but he'll want to kill and cause mayhem and I know that I have to stop him...by any means." I pressed harder against him. He was trembling.

"Do NOT do anything stupid!" I said firmly as I closed my eyes. "He focusses on you and makes you focus on him...but maybe a new plan against him may work better?"

"What plan?"

"Haven't got that far, Dragon Boy. That's your area-Commander. I'm just here to do the paperwork..."

"And sew me up when it all goes horribly wrong," he sighed. "Get some sleep. We can think about that in the morning."

It was a fabulous winter day in Birmingham-by which I mean cold, with low clouds, drizzle and foul visibility. But it was fabulous for us because no one would be looking up and we could drift through the low cloud pretty much unseen. We had arrived in the small hours and parked up in a railway yard in the north east of the city. The twins, Snotlout and Gustav had sneaked out without helmets and had returned with nine coffees and ten bacon butties (Snotlout brought himself two) which I had to admit were very welcome. Hiccup had thanked them all and the twins had winked while Snotlout gave a broad grin as he masticated his way through his second butty.

We had saddled up and headed out immediately afterwards while it was still early and took our appointed spots on the roofs. I settled by Hiccup on the roof of the Hotel where the delegates were staying, just across the road from the Convention Centre and joined by a first floor level bridge. The security services stationed on the roof had been shocked but Hiccup dismounted, unclipping his leg and raising his hands as they covered him with their pistols. He lifted his BERK ID and introduced himself to them. I watched from Stormfly as the shift commander confirmed our clearance and the men relaxed, lowering their weapons. I leapt down and showed my ID as well, but they backed away, looking very uncomfortable and embarrassed around our dragons.

The others were ranged on various high points on the Library, Arena, Convention Centre, hotels and the Rotunda. Snotlout and the twins were betting how soon it would be before Dagur turned up and whether the lacy metal cladding on the library would melt or explode when the Skrill hit it. Hiccup fished out his tablet and accessed the BERK systems, checking on his searches. He stiffened and patted my arm, flipping his helmet back. I frowned at the breach of the order he himself had given us but his eyes were wide with anxiety and he stared into my face.

"There's something they didn't tell us," he said in a low voice, walking away from the security guards. I leaned closer and flipped my faceplate up as well, seeing the nervous look he cast over his shoulder.

"Hiccup?" I asked. There was a real edge to his tone.

"This meeting isn't just of Finance Ministers of the G20 countries," he said in a bitter voice. "They've invited leading industrialists as well to their discussions. And the most important of these...is Drago Bludvist."
I stared at Hiccup. Drago Bludvist was here? The man who organised our kidnapping and torture was an honoured guest in this Summit and we were supposed to be protecting him?

"Isn't he supposed to be a Terrorist?" I asked pointedly.

"Nothing proven," Hiccup said grimly, his green gaze flicking over the screen. "What Gobber has sent me barely covers the attendance list. Despite our affiliations, no one wants to help us." I stared up into the clouds: the cover which shielded us from casual observers could also shield our enemies. And they had a colour-changing dragon.

"It's a trap," I realised. "They want us to get blamed for whatever happens." I stared at him. "And they have a Changewing, Hiccup. It can go invisible-and attack. And whatever is nearest will get blamed…"

"Everyone-you are NOT to move until I give the order," he shouted down his com. "The situation is complicated. Do not make it any moreso!" He thumbed the com back to the base frequency. "Haddock to Gobber, come in. What the Hel is Drago doing here? What does he want?"

"Probably for yer tae attack him, laddie," Gobber replied without any humour. "Or seem tae?"

"Gobber-get my father on the line-I don't care how," Hiccup ordered. "He has fought Drago for years. He knows him better than I do."

"Gothi will have my ass fer breakfast, laddie!" Gobber protested.

"Please, Gobber," Hiccup said quietly. "I-I can't figure this out by myself…"

"Laddie-I'm sure ye will. And ye have Astrid tae help ye," Gobber assured him. "I'll get back tae ye if Gothi doesnae put me in the infirmary by him!" I smiled at his chagrined tone and Hiccup nodded.

"Thanks," he said in a depressed voice. I grabbed his hand and leaned close to him.

"Dragon Boy, think around the problem," I advised him softly. "We can't see. They can't see…in visible light."

"Thermal radiation?"

"Or echolocation-when they know they're near?" I suggest.

"…and we tagged Heather and Windshear," he considered quietly. "This is a big operation-and Heather warned us about it. She's in on this. They wanted us here. She'll be in their team."

"Attaboy!" I murmured as he called IT and asked for a location on the treacherous Rider and dragon. He leaned against me and rested his head gently against mine.

"Thanks, Milady," he murmured. "You knew the answer, didn't you?" I smiled, enjoying his closeness, his warmth. I always felt safer with him there. And I knew he hadn't slept well on the way down- neither had I really. He had woken in the night, screaming with another nightmare. This time, he had been begging Dagur to leave him alone, pleading pitifully for the man to stop whatever he was doing. He had been thrashing and crying and I had to restrain him, though he had
caught me a glancing blow across the cheek. So I had clung to him, shushing him and holding him until he had calmed and woken…and then he had seen the red mark on my cheek and he had almost started crying in shame for hurting me. I had spent a long time holding him and soothing him until he realised it hadn't been his fault and had dropped off to sleep. But it had taken me longer because it knew it had been mine. I had mentioned Dagur and I had shaken loose whatever horrible memory he was reliving.

"Heather's location is currently 52 degrees 34 minutes 58 seconds north, 1 degree 58 minutes 12 seconds west," the voice came over the com. "She is flying over Walsall on a south south easterly course…"

"Ground speed?"

"One hundred miles and hour and closing," the reply came.

"Heads Up!" Hiccup shouted. "They are less than six minutes out and closing!" He turned to Toothless and leapt into the saddle. He leaned forward and laid a hand gently on Toothless's neck. "Ready, bud?" The dragon gave a rumbling croon and looked back at his rider with big trusting eyes. He gave a series of little barks. Hiccup sighed.

"Yeah, I think we'll be seeing Dagur and that Skrill again," he admitted. Toothless growled. "Yeah, I know you don't like that dragon," he said, moving his prosthetic slightly. "He's not my favourite dragon either. And I really don't wanna lose any more legs so let's be careful, huh?" Toothless gave a little laughing noise and I stared from Stormfly's back. "It's alright for you," Hiccup replied in a hurt voice. "You've got four!"

My com beeped. "Less than three minutes," the IT tech, Will, informed us. Hiccup sat up on Toothless. We were on the Hyatt, all 24 floors of steel and glass with the best-and highest-viewpoint looking north of the Convention Centre.

"Okay, bud-show us what we're facing!" I flipped my visor to thermal imaging-not as problematic as might been thought on such a cold winter's day-while Toothless opened his mouth and emitted a roar I had never heard before. But I felt it reverberate through my skull and inner ear and I winced. The security men doubled up and clamped their hands over their ears. Toothless swung his head north and his ear-flaps flicked and rotated. He gave a roar.

"Anything?" I asked. Hiccup nodded.

"I think seven," he murmured. "Though that really shouldn't be possible…" I peered in the direction Toothless was pointing and augmented my visor vision: dragons were so hot they stood out like little flares against the sky, even through the damp clouds.

"Agreed. Seven bogies, incoming and hot!" I snapped.

"About time!" Snotlout grumbled. "Okay, boss-what do we do?"

"Wait and see how they deploy," Hiccup ordered. "We CANNOT fire first. We are here to protect-the delegates and BERK. Thorstons-do I need to repeat myself?"

"Look who turned into the General!" Tuffnut grumbled over the com.

"We promise not to blow anything up…first…" Ruffnut added. I heard Hiccup groan.

"Cami-Swiftsoar can sense the Changewing better than any of the others, can't she?" I asked.
"Roger that!" was the cheery reply.

"Keep 'em peeled for it." I asked. "That damned thing is the biggest menace to our reputation. Find it, neutralise it and take it down. I will trank it if needed so call me!"

"Roger, L-T!" Cami shot back, her voice amused.

"Bud?" Hiccup urged and the dragon roared again. This time, I could almost hear the returning echoes myself. Toothless roared-and the clouds roared back.

"Visors to thermal to get a bead then back before they start firing!" I shouted, seeing them close to within a few hundred yards.

"HOLD!" Hiccup shouted then snapped round to look at the security men on the roof. "And take cover! NOW!"

And with that, the dragons attacked. The Deadly Nadder and Changewing came straight at us but the dark green Monstrous Nightmare and the silver and red Zippleback were both unknown, ridden by men wearing the same uniform we had seen in the Oil Refinery. I launched to hover over the hotel and then the thunder rumbled and Hiccup stiffened.

"Hello, brother!" Dagur shouted from overhead.

Lightning struck the building as the Changewing launched a huge gout of acid at the Presidential Suite below us. I dived, urging Stormfly to fire and her ultra hot flame vapourised the acid-but also melted the glass and the roof of a municipal building below. Eret accelerated up from the Library and headed directly at the Skrill, his heavy duty dragon less quick but much heavier. It impacted into the Skrill before Dagur could realise that Hiccup hadn't risen immediately to the challenge. The blow almost knocked him off the dragon and the Skrill shrieked and bucked against him.

"Guys!" Fishlegs shouted. "The plaza here is still full of civilians!" I stared down and gaped. The Square and the road were covered in commuters all scurrying to and from work, heads down and umbrellas up. Not one had a clue what was happening. As I watched, another double-decker bus disgorged several dozen more potential casualties.

"SHIT!" I swore. "Fish-can you clear the streets?" Then the other Nadder fired a volley of spines and Toothless and Stormily split, screeching apart. Toothless flipped and Hiccup levelled him straight at the other Nadder as Fishlegs's Gronckle swooped down onto the Square and began shouting at the shocked citizens, trying to herd them away.

"SAVAGE!" he shouted and the other man laughed, spinning to face the Night Fury.

"I always thought you were too big for your boots-little boy!" he sneered and fired more spines at the black dragon. "I should have spanked you harder!" I glanced over and saw the strange Zippleback attacking the Convention Centre-but the explosion was met by a pair of whooping Thorstons who rolled Barf'n'Belch to entangle the strange Zippleback. Cami and Gustav had taken on the unknown Monstrous Nightmare and Snotlout found himself face to face with Heather. He narrowed his eyes, tightening his grip on his dragon's horns.

"Hello, Heather," he called. "Having fun?"

"More when I'm treading on your lifeless corpse, Snot!" she sneered.

"Ah, my adoring public!" he said with a sigh. "Hookfang-get 'er!"
Our attackers were fierce and unrestrained while we were hampered by our need to protect the hotel against attacks. Eret was struggling with Dagur, who was fighting to get through to Hiccup while I seemed to be faced with the Changewing. I was close enough that he couldn't get away by vanishing. Stormfly had perfected follow the leader after Toothless and we stuck to him like glue-and then I slapped my hand on the back of her head and she fired her lethally accurate single spineshot, ripping through the Changewing's wing and causing it to veer off, its rabid acid yellow gaze locking on me.

Suddenly, the seventh dragon appeared-larger than the others with a narrow head like Hookfang, long horns and similar wings but it was a pale grey and seemed to be wearing plates of iron on its body like armour. Another of the uniformed men was riding, ploughing straight at the hotel. "LOOK OUT!" I screamed at Hiccup and he rolled to avoid a blast of flame that looked hot enough to melt iron. I fired again at the Changewing as Hiccup rolled back to use Toothless to deflect the flame away from the hotel. Thunder was roaring overhead and suddenly Hiccup and Toothless were hit by the Skrill diving down away from Eret.

"You can't get away from me, brother-and I am very disappointed that you tried to avoid me!" Dagur yelled. "I am going to have to punish you for that. Won't that be fun?" Toothless and the Skrill were rolling and roaring as they clawed at one another, biting and snapping. Eret soared over and I gestured towards the huge newcomer.

"Haven't you got anything bigger?" he shouted sarcastically.

"You'll just have to manage!" I replied rolling to keep the Changewing off the hotel. I glanced across; the twins were enjoying their battle with the quiet and apparently humourless riders of the other Zippleback. The strange Monstrous Nightmare couldn't match Gustav's antics and the youngest Rider had him fleeing from his crazy assault. Cami flew up-almost to be hit by a spray of Nadder spines and she managed an impressive burst of cursing over the coms. The Square was cleared by Fishlegs, who was hovering protectively over a small knot of bystanders, trapped at the doorway of the Library. Snotlout, though, was determined not to let the team down and he was chasing Heather who was looking more and more frantic.

"ERET!" she screamed. "HELP ME!" But the Rumblehorn Rider wasn't fooled this time and concentrated on his task as Snotlout looped round in an audacious flip and crashed deliberately into her, slamming her unconscious. Windshear gave a huge roar of anguish as her rider was snatched from her back. I flipped round and drew, shooting the Razorwhip three times. She croaked and then began to fold, flapping feebly as she spiralled down, hammering into the paving stones of the Square and shattering them. Snotlout surged upwards towards the hotel, seeing the Changewing come for another strafing run on the upper floors, where the diplomatic guests were housed.

"HEY!" Snotlout shouted. "VORG! Can't hit anything smaller than a hotel?"

The Changewing instantly pulled away and came straight at the Monstrous Nightmare and Snotlout gave a shout and flew away, with the traitor in hot pursuit. Hiccup got Toothless to fire furiously at the Skrill from point blank range and the dragon screamed and whirled away, favouring its left wing and both front paws. Hiccup was breathing hard as he faced Dagur.

"Get out of here-you aren't going to win!" he swore. Dagur looked down-as he saw the strange Zippleback get blown up for the umpteenth time by the twins, who were really going to town. As he watched, the dragon had had enough and wheeled away, accelerating up into the clouds and away. The strange Monstrous Nightmare, also badly burnt and scratched by Gustav's relentless assault, gave a pathetic roar and chased after the fleeing Zippleback. The huge armoured dragon-which had found Eret stubborn and determined to keep slamming into it to drive it back-broke
away and followed.

"You overestimate your stupid little team of losers, brother!" Dagur screamed as Vorg came round and launched a huge load of acid at Snotlout. Snot reacted on instinct, getting Hookfang to reply with a huge fireball to vaporise the oncoming acid. But it was too huge and the flames roared on-hitting Vorg straight on. There was a scream and then silence.

I soared up and gestured to Snotlout, who arrowed up as I tranked the Changeling and it gave a pathetic cry before it went limp and was scooped up by Hookfang, to be laid down by Windshear. We all tried not to look at the charred shape welded to the saddle. Snotlout touched down and handed Heather to Fishlegs. Eret remained in the sky, with Gustav and Cami—and I joined them, hovering in formation between the hotel and the other two. Dagur stared at us with fury in his pale eyes before gesturing to his companion.

"SAVAGE-time to go!" he shouted and arrowed up into the clouds. I climbed up to hover by Toothless and looked over at Hiccup. He sent me an anxious glance. We could see people emerging from their hiding places, cameras and phones pointing at us. In moments, we would be all over social media. But Hiccup was shaking his head.

"Far too easy," he murmured. "If they were serious, they would come at night, when they were all in their rooms and take out the hotel. This was a diversion—but for what?"

"The base?" I murmured. He stared at me and looked horrified.

"Thor, yes!" he breathed, then glanced down at the downed dragons. "IS EVERYONE ALRIGHT?" he added, checking his team.

"That was awesome!" Tuffnut exulted. "It was like fighting myself!"

"Yeah—and we got to blow loads of stuff up!" Ruffnut added happily. I looked down and saw scorched patches and smashed windows all over the Convention Centre. I sighed.

"Cami and I are fine, sir," Eret reported.

"The Snotman is in the house and in one piece!" Snotlout announced.

"Fanghook and I fired it up!" Gustav shouted. "Whoo-hoo!"

"Not exactly what I asked," Hiccup commented sarcastically.

"Fine, sir," I reported.

"Meatlug and I are okay!" Fishlegs added. Hiccup sighed in relief.

"Right-Fish-make sure those dragons are sedated and remain docile," he ordered. "Eret and Ruff-will you take charge of Heather? I want her tranked as well and transferred to secure medical quarters on the base. Cami-can you provide some camouflaged overview of the hotel roof for a few minutes please? All of you except Cami and Astrid-get back to the train as soon as possible before we are all over the news!"

"Too late," I murmured.

"And what will you be doing?" Snotlout asked sharply.

"Checking everyone is okay on the hotel and joining you later," Hiccup reported. "Snot-you're in
charge. Try not to wreck the train on the way home. Base-get Gobber to clear the tracks and get the
train home now. I don't care how many people we upset-we have two recaptured dragons and
Heather and we need them in containment!" He turned to me. "Land," he said shortly.
Once we had touched down on the hotel roof, he fussed over Toothless-and then turned to me,
inspecting me carefully then wrapping me in a tight hug. "Thank Odin you're safe," he murmured. I
hugged him back, relief washing over me as well. I always worried when he faced Dagur.
"Right back at you," I whispered. "Hiccup-why are we here?"
"This doesn't make sense," he repeated, "so I'm looking for answers. They hit the Presidential
Suite. But the attack was otherwise wholly unfocussed. They weren't even trying to capture us-they
were just…fighting." He paused. "When they go by train, we'll fly home straight. Our dragons are
fast, Astrid-they can get us home faster and we may be able to stop the incursion if my
countermeasures weren't enough…" I hugged him tighter.
"They'll be fine," I reassured him. "You are brilliant, Dragon Boy. I have complete faith in you!"
"That makes one of us," he murmured as the security men approached-and the time they weren't
alone. Their supervisor was with them-and three more armed men. The supervisor offered his
hand, which Hiccup automatically shook.
"You guys are really impressive!" the man said in an admiring voice. "Well-drilled unit, too!"
"Er, thanks," Hiccup said in a surprised voice, having never heard the team described as such. I
didn't trust the supervisor-what sort of man wears sunglasses on a drizzly cold gloomy winter's
day? "Is everyone…?"
"Zero casualties-in no part to your efforts, Commander," he enthused. "Please-come in. The
Russian Finance Minister-who seems to have been the target of the attack-is very keen to thank you
in person..." Hiccup backed away a step.
"Oh, I couldn't possibly take any of his valuable time…" Hiccup said urgently, backing up another
step. This was getting far too close for comfort. Suddenly, we were surrounded by men with guns.
"Oh-kay…not an invitation," he murmured and nodded to me.
"Cami-keep everyone but us away from our dragons," I whispered into my helmet com. "Keep out
of sight and out of range of any weapons. There is some weird shit going on."
"Roger-but call if you need help," she replied as we vanished into the lift. One floor down, the
doors slid open onto the Presidential Suite and we were forced forward. A man I had never seen in
a dark suit nodded as Security shoved us forward-then retreated into the lift. But men in the
uniform we both recognised lined the walls, guns held ready. The dark suited man smiled.
"I am Minster Grigori Ulmarsov of the Russian Federation," he introduced himself, his pale blue
eyes remote. His fine pale blond hair was cut short and his broad face was emotionless. "My friend
here is very admiring of your efforts…"
"Especially yours-Night Fury Rider!" a familiar gravelly voice said and the leather chair swung
round-to display the huge, powerful shape of Drago Bludvist. I was struck how, in person, his eyes
seemed to have even less life-like the eyes of a shark. His dark complexion was marred by white
scars over his face and his black hair hung in incongruous dreadlocks around his heavy head, atop
a clearly bespoke Saville Row suit. Hiccup backed away, suddenly breathing hard.
"I think this interview is over," he said quietly but two of Drago's men flanked us, guns raised and


one grabbed his helmet, wrenching it off. Drago leaned forward-and his face collapsed in a look of utter shock.

"Stoick's little embarrassment?" he gasped. Hiccup gave a grim, lopsided smile.

"The one and only," he murmured. "Though not so much since my father died of a heart attack. I am Base Commander now. And do you think we are here alone? I have eyes in the sky and a team that will tear this place apart to get us."

"And so will our dragons!" I added. Drago dismissed me and focussed his dark, emotionless glare on Hiccup.

"You know, my men have armour piercing rounds that seem to be very effective against dragons," he snarled. "Your team storms in here and there will be casualties."

"And you will be one!" Hiccup promised, though I could see his hands trembling.

"And your little girlfriend another!" Drago sneered, his gaze finally sweeping over me. I ripped my helmet off and glared at him, furious and defiant.

"Then we need a compromise," Hiccup said quietly, considering the levels of casualties on both sides and the collateral damage to the Finance Ministers who almost certainly were still in residence and weren't in Drago's pocket, as Minister Ulmarsov seemed to be. "You wanted me. But you don't get the dragons or her."

My com hissed in my ear. "Another dragon just landed the other side of the roof!" Cami hissed. "I think it's…"

The lift opened. "Hallo, brother," Dagur grinned and strode straight up to Hiccup. I could see him stiffen and his eyes widen in horror as the traitor grabbed his arm and stroked his face. Hiccup tried to pull away, rigid with fear.

"Is that satisfactory, Mr Osawaldson?" Drago mouthed. Dagur jerked Hiccup closer and stared into the ashen face.

"Entirely," he said madly. "Alvin gets his Night Fury Rider and I get my brother back-once he's been punished for not playing nicely with me…"

"And the dragons?" Drago prompted.

"Are unimportant," Dagur grinned. "Not now I have my Hiccupy little brother here once more!"

"Hiccup!" I protested, stricken at his terror. He half turned to look at me and he gave me a despairing look. He extended his hand with his helmet towards me.

"Take it," he breathed. "You know everything I do. You have access to everything I have. I have copied you in and given you access to everything. Take Toothless-you will be able to fly him. He will trust you. You and Stormfly will be able to get back as we discussed. And don't forget…I love you."

I swallowed, unable to speak. My eyes were burning with tears as I took his helmet and stared once last time into his shining green eyes.

"Please rescue me," he whispered. I nodded as the armed guards forced me back into the lift.
"I'm coming for you, babe!" I shouted as the lift closed and I found myself deposited on the roof once more. I stabbed the lift controls but they had locked me out. So I ran for the dragons. "Camiget outta here!" I commanded. "TRAP! Get back to the train and go! We'll catch you up!" Then I ran to Toothless and showed him the helmet. He sniffed it and gave a sad little croon. I took a deep breath and stood back-then offered him my hand, looking away as I had done with Stormfly, that first magical time we bonded. Then I sighed with relief as Toothless pressed his nose into my hand, trusting me as his Rider's friend. I looked into the sad acid-green eyes.

"Toothless-I'm sorry-we have to get you away from here-because I don't trust them and Hiccup certainly doesn't. He stayed to let us get away. Will you let me fly you?" He paused then fidgeted and invited me onto his saddle. I warily climbed aboard: it was a much lower, more aerodynamic position than mine and I felt the foot rest under my right foot and small pedal under my left. I pressed my heel down and the tail opened. I blinked then looked up at my own dragon. "Stormfly-home! Follow us, okay?" She chirped happily. Then I leaned forward on the Night Fury.

"Toothless-HOME!"

He took off at once, flying jerkily because my command of the pedal was shaky. We bobbed and jerked but I began to get the hang of it as we circled up followed by Stormfly and I saw the phalanx of armed men erupt onto the roof, their guns pointed at us. I blinked and my eyes were blinded by tears. "Take me home," I whispered, Hiccup's helmet clutched tightly as we flew north.

The Diplomatic car of the Russian Finance Minister swept through the city, police outriders clearing the way to the airport. The tinted windows hid the occupants as the car accelerated south-east out of the city and the outriders drew in line ahead of the car. Drago nodded to Hiccup, bound and gagged and sagging in the seat by Alvin, who had also been waiting for him to arrive.

"I've kept my part of the deal," he growled, his scarred face twisted into a menacing leer. "You have your Night Fury Rider. Now I want my dues." Alvin gripped Hiccup's arm and squeezed painfully. The young Rider opened his bleary green eyes and glared at the Arms Dealer.

"And yer'll get 'em, Bludvist," he assured in his slimiest tone. "Now I 'ave 'Iccup, I can train all them dragons ter yer specifications..." Hiccup shook his head and Alvin dug his fingers hard into his bicep, causing him to wince in pain. "Though 'e may need a little training 'imself first." Hiccup swallowed, his eyes widening in fear. He could guess what they were planning. Drago gave a nasty laugh.

"Boy looks like he'll soil himself," he sneered. "Stoick's little embarrassment indeed..."

Those words crystallised Hiccup's determination: no matter what happened, no matter what they did to him, he wouldn't break. He would not help Alvin or Drago. And he would never submit to Dagur. He lifted his chin and glared at Drago.

Alvin lifted his mobile and thumbed in the number. "Phase One is complete. Activate Phase Two." He gave a yellow grin to Drago and leaned close to Hiccup, his thumb stroking the bruised, pale face of the Rider. Hiccup flinched and tried to pull away. "'Iccup, 'Iccup, 'Iccup," he sighed. "You really should learn to co-operate once in a while and do things the easy way. And now-yer outta time. By the time yer friends get 'ome, the base will be ours. And when they arrive back from 'ere, we will just 'ave to choose the dragons we want-and dispose of the dragons and riders we don't."
Hiccup wrestled and fought, thrashing against the strong hands holding him as they restrained him after they arrived back in Alvin's base. Alvin's men were manhandling him roughly into a steel chair, situated in the middle of a blank white room. The floor was made of concrete and he thought he could see faint brown stains on the floor: old blood. Cruel hands forced his limbs against the metal structure of the chair and the plastic ties they fastened bit deeply into his arms. He could feel the surge of pain as they cut across the stitches in his left arm and he winced. His legs were pinned, tied tightly at the ankle and the knee. Then the men withdrew to the periphery of the room and watched as he gritted his teeth against the pain, still struggling. Alvin fisted his hair and leaned close, the man's foul breath caressing his pale skin as he pulled his head right back.

"Yer know, boy-Drugo really wanted yer for 'is own!" he breathed. Hiccup swallowed, blinking hard. He couldn't imagine how that would work but he knew the man would kill him slowly and painfully.

"Sucks to be popular," he gasped.

"And I want yer more," Alvin told him, his beard bristling against Hiccup's bruised cheek.

"Not my type," Hiccup gulped.

"Dagur is," Alvin chuckled. "E's dying to get inter yer pants, boy!"

"I-I-I'll pass…" Oh please, I will pass.

Alvin laughed as he felt the prisoner tremble, saw the fear in his eyes, despite his brave words and knew that Hiccup had too much baggage to resist them for long…and had far too much history with Dagur. He lifted his head and nodded as one of his men walked forward and stabbed the fine needle into Hiccup's extended neck, emptying the syringe into his trembling body. Hiccup shivered and gasped as Alvin released him and watched the young man slump forward.

Hiccup felt sweat stand out of his brow and felt the heat coursing through his body. His limbs felt heavy-so very heavy, utterly impossible to move. He struggled and felt his focus melting, his resistance evaporating. Alvin was very close, threatening pain, threatening…Dagur. Hiccup knew the deranged rider wanted him…wanted to rape him and possess him and he was repelled by Dagur. But perhaps Dagur would be kind and loving and gentle, if he was a colleague, not an enemy…

…NO!

He shook his head. These men had caused him immeasurable pain and misery and fear, had tried to steal his beloved Toothless…

…but maybe they had the right of it? Why should the dragons belong to governments when they could belong to their riders? To people who understood and DESERVED to rule using their power…


…but it could be…you. Your Dad lied and rejected you for so many years…you had no home, no friends, no family…
You have a family. Your Dad is proud of you. Gobber loves you like a son. Toothless is your brother, your protector, your constant companion, your best friend...

...how pathetic are you, with your only friend a dragon? How pathetic are you that no girl would ever go out with you, they all laugh at you and scorn you and humiliate you? No wonder they think...

You have Astrid. Those men ordered Ozzie dead. Ozzie was your friend and they took him from you. You have Gobber and Fish and even your cousin. They tried to kill you and your father and Astrid...

...oh, Astrid...please get me out of here! Please help me against these monsters! Please stop the voices, nagging and insistent and whispering such seductive lies...Please stop me becoming what I hate, what I loathe! Please protect me from Dagur and his psychopathic desire to turn me into his brother though he means lover... But you're the only one I want...You are the only one I love... Please please please believe me...I will never betray you...I want to come back to you and be with you and never leave you...I love you...

...I love you Toothless, my brother, my best friend...I won't let them ever get their hands on you, ever use you for evil...ever take you from me and give you to someone as a weapon, as a thing, not the person who always comes for me, always will be there for me...you and Astrid are my family, my life...and I will never betray you...no matter what it costs me...no matter how much they take from me...

The fog was clearing, the pressure on his senses lifting. His body still felt as if it was burning, painful and insistent, and his limbs didn't belong to him still. But he felt no desire to help Alvin, no desire to yield to Dagur. He would fight them with every ounce of his strength, would accept whatever torments they gave him in return because he wouldn't betray BERK. He focussed on his memories of Astrid's beloved face, the blue eyes shining with her love and concern for him, the little smile, the gentle press of her lips against his, her strong arms wound protectively around his lanky shape, the nuzzle of her head against his chest and he felt the pressure ease even further. She was his shield, his protection against whatever they had done to him. Somehow, it hadn't worked. Somehow, he had fought it off, had done what Heather could not. He swallowed.

"Are yer feelin' a little more 'elpful, 'Iccup?" Alvin gloated, standing in front of him. Hiccup blearily raised his head. His skull was pounding, his eyes hurt, he felt sick and every muscle was aching. He felt as if his mind was still wrapped in fog but he felt Astrid's love with him and his eyes locked on the man opposite him, his mind made up. He could hear Dagur shuffling his feet to the side, anticipating his capitulation, anticipating his acquiescence—and that gave him more strength. He managed a small snarl at the Outcast leader.

"Alvin..." he rasped, "...go to Hel."

I stared at the mountain as we circled and dived down towards the main garage. To hell with protocol and containment rules! The Garage was in the main part of the base and I would be damned if I was walking all the way back from Pen One when there were more pressing things to do. The door cracked open and I leaned forward on Toothless, feeling the responsive Night Fury adjust his flight. I cast a glance at Stormfly and she gave me a happy little squawk. I felt bad that I had abandoned her for Hiccup's dragon but Toothless couldn't fly without a rider and I knew my girl would follow me if I called. We arrowed in and landed neatly just in front of the waiting shape. Gobber limped forward, his eyes wide at my complete breach of protocol. I leapt off Toothless and
petted him and then hugged my girl as well before letting the dragons have a little bounce and play. I knew they wouldn't do much because we had flown back straight: both were fast enough to make the flight in a couple of hours straining themselves. The others would be coming by the train—I knew Gobber had just screwed up the train timetable on the busiest train line in the country and inconvenienced the journeys of tens of thousands of commuters to get them home ASAP. Somehow, that thought made me ridiculously proud.

"What're ye doing, lass?" he asked suspiciously. I ignored the question.

"Did you do as I asked?" I shot back. He nodded.

"Not really understanding the order, lass, but Bucket and Mulch managed ter get him inter the Pen. Though I would like an explanation."

"We have retrieved Heather and Windshear and the other Changewing. His rider was killed," I told him briskly. "They are fully tranked and coming on the train. Fishlegs is watching them and will let us know if anything changes. He's under orders to shoot them again if they show signs of waking. Snotlout and Eret are in charge and I actually believe they won't wreck the train on the way up." Gobber raised a sceptical eyebrow and I managed a small smile before the grin fell from my face. "Drago has Hiccup. Dagur was there was well so I presume he is probably now with Alvin."

"Gods, that poor boy," he murmured. "They..." I walked forward and gently caught his shoulder.

"We'll get him back," I promised and my voice was colder than I had intended. If it was the last thing I did, I was going to get him back—and avenge whatever they did to him. "We've learned from our mistakes. He's got a tracker, Gobber. He insisted I injected him with one before we left. I have one as well." I winced: that had really hurt. Then I lifted my com and called the IT tech Hiccup had assigned to support us and oversee his running programmes while we were on mission-Wiliam-MM. I had asked why he emphasised the 'mMM' and he had given that cute lopsided grin and explained that Will fully met the 'stupid name' criterion for BERK as the poor guy's name was William Mayweather-Makepeace or William M-M. It was clearly an IT in-joke and I had smiled at the young guy's embarrassment.

"IT!" The voice was cheery—there still seemed to be a good spirit in the team, despite Ozzie's loss. I recalled he had been a youngish guy with an infectious smile and twinkling blue eyes when I met him briefly yesterday.

"Will—it's Astrid Hofferson. Activate the tracker and find me Hiccup!" I ordered.

"Wait—he's not with you?" Will's voice was worried and I felt gratitude that others worried for him as well.

"No—he's in trouble," I revealed.

"On it," he reported and cut off. I turned to Gobber.

"I believe they will come for us in the next few hours," I reported. "We have half the team at the other end of the country and they have our leader. Drago's private jet will have taken Hiccup up north and I guess Dagur and Savage will have flown direct to Alvin's base of operations. They will think we are in disarray. Hiccup told them Stoick was dead and he was now in command—so they will believe that taking him will leave us essentially leaderless."

"That lad oughtta learn ter keep his mouth shut," Gobber grumbled.
"Hiccup wanted the attackers trapped in Pen Seven," I told him. "But I like my idea better." Gobber opened his mouth and then he froze. I looked around to see Toothless and Stormfly sitting calmly behind me. Toothless's eyes were wide and green, his pupils dilated and calm and very trusting. Stormfly was also relaxed, settled close by her friend.

"Er, lass-why are the dragons here?" he asked in a wary voice. It was the first time I hadn't seen Gobber completely at ease and I grinned.

"Because this was the quickest way to get to base, rather than arriving a mile's walk from the main sectors!" I told him as if it was obvious. "I'll take them to Pen Five..." And then there was an alarm and the main door deadlocked. My com whined and Will's voice immediately cut in.

"Lieutenant Astrid-Hiccup's protocol has been activated. The firewall has detected the activation code for the system booby-traps. They are coming in."

"On my way," I called and I nodded to Gobber. "Get me three security men and let's go to the Pens," I said, whistling. Both the dragons leapt up and walked after me. Gobber's eyes widened.

"They're coming with yer?" he asked in shock. I nodded.

"I think we underuse our dragons," I told him sternly. "And if we are at risk of being breached, if we are going to be facing Alvin's armed men invading our base, why the hell shouldn't I face them with a pair of fire-breathing dragons at my back?" Gobber's eyes widened and he gave a grudging nod.

"I'm glad I'm on yer side, lass!" he commented and limped along at my side, snapping orders over his com. Security met us as we arrived at the Pen level-three burly men including Sergeant Yorgash Grimsdaal, the current senior officer. He scowled as he saw the dragons but I shook my head and he levelled his trank-rifle ahead and nodded to his men as they jogged ahead, clearing our path to the main security door to the Pen area. I took a deep breath as I accessed the Pen area using my palm-print and retinal scans: Hiccup had been very specific that two forms of senior cleared biometric ID were required to get in-or out-after the protocol was activated. This was serious and I really wanted him here by my side. Somehow, I felt this was way above my pay-grade but I was a soldier and, strangely, I seemed to be in operational command. The door slid open.

The area was lit by red emergency lights and the sounds of the fans had died. Hiccup had disabled air-con in the entry area to mimic the desired base-wide effects of the malware Spitelout had implanted before his death. The air was cool but not stuffy yet and we walked in then Gobber locked the door behind us. With a deep breath, I walked to Pen Seven and stared at the door. I activated the screen and looked inside the Pen.

"Will?" I whispered over the com.

"External door opening now," he replied softly. "Six men entering. There is one dragon in the glen. Deadly Nadder."

"Savage," Gobber growled.

"Men are all inside now. Door closing automatically," Will reported.

"Deadlock it-open only on my personal command," I said in a shaky voice. No going back now. This was for Hiccup and Ozzie and everyone else who had suffered from their treason. "Do you have an ID?"

"Four unknowns," Will reported as the shadowy figures appeared in the field of view and moved
cautiously towards the pen door. "Two identified. Petter Amund and Evan Savage."

"Bingo," I murmured and looked at Gobber. He stared at me and shrugged.

"Yer show, lass," he said.

"What would you do? What would he?" I asked quietly.

"Hiccup would make every effort to take them alive," he said. "I…wouldn't. The General certainly wouldn't." I blinked and lifted my chin as they approached the door.

"Security-activate the automated pacifying system outside the emergency gate," I ordered. There had to be a way of bringing down an escaping dragon and I had bothered to find out what failsafe measures the base had on offer to prevent escapes. A battery of tranquilliser guns were fitted around each entrance, under direct control of the security command centre. "Trank the Nadder. I want him unconscious now!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" came the voice over the com. "Tracking…target locked…three clean hits…dragon down."

"Good work," I said calmly though my heart was pounding. Was I doing the right thing? I stared at the screen and then I remembered all those wounds, marking the man I loved. All the pain he had endured. All the misery he had suffered. The nightmares that still woke him. My eyes hardened.

The intruders had reached the Pen gate and were tapping in the override code that Spitelout had inserted, confidently waiting for the door to slide open and allow them to continue on whatever fell plan they had. But they stood back-and nothing happened. Amund punched in the code again-with the same result. He exchanged words with Savage, who made some comment, then went to repeat the action himself, confident that he would succeed where the former security man had failed. But he stabbed the code in twice with no success and turned to snarl at the other when I stabbed the com-link to the Pen, my words echoing through the control panel.

"You can try the code until Doomsday but it won't work," I announced. "Hiccup found the back door you left the day after you were uncovered and removed it." They stared at the panel in shock.

"You're lying!" Savage growled. "We got in…" I smiled.

"It's what's known as…a trap," I said coldly. They stared at the screen, then turned and made for the external door. "And it's been deadlocked. You go there and you die!" I snarled. That stopped them in their tracks.

"What do you mean?" Amund shouted suspiciously. I leaned closer to the panel.

"Do you think you're alone in there?" I asked in a low voice. They all looked around and they all raised their weapons. I could see uncertainty cross their faces. Savage glanced at the door.

"What do you mean?" he asked and the shifting of his stance and the others around him told me I had them where I wanted them.

"Hiccup wanted to trap you in the Pen and use it as prison," I told them coldly. "But Hiccup is a prisoner of your boss. He's been beaten and tortured by you people. You have made his life hell. And he still wanted to do this the non-violent way. But he's not here and I am. And I am not as forgiving as my boyfriend because I know he is suffering now. And if he suffers-so can you." I took a deep breath. "Donald Harrigan's Changewing has become very disturbed and impossible to handle since his death. A death you caused. A death Hiccup regrets. A death I regretted because it
was unnecessary. But yours…is not."

"What do you mean?" Savage's voice had risen and he was backing towards the door.

"You drop your weapons and I will let you out and into our custody," I said. I meant it: I was still offering them a chance because I owed it to Hiccup. "You will spend the rest of your lives in a military prison."

"And if we don't?" Amund shouted. They could hear slithering and hissing now. I leaned close to the com.

"Good luck against a deranged, furious, invisible, hot acid-spitting dragon," I said icily. They fanned out and in the middle of the loose semi-circle, the red shape of Skyshimmer appeared, his whole body trembling with fury. Acid was dripping from his mouth as he swung his head, his yellow eyes slitted with unreachable rage. But Savage lifted a hand and walked forward, trying insanely to train this dragon. He knew Skyshimmer from the time before he defected: he probably imagined that he had a relationship with the dragon, that he could calm him. He took another pace closer and raised his hand towards the dragon's muzzle.

The Changewing spat and about a gallon of burning green acid hit Savage's head and upper body. His scream echoed through the pen and the corridor outside. The melting figure clawed at his head and folded, silencing as he hit the ground. Amund took a pace back, lifted his gun and fired away. But dragons tended to be bullet-proof and Amund wasn't even firing bullets: his gun was spewing red darts. Firing Dracoradix darts at an already enraged dragon was possibly the stupidest thing I've ever seen. Skyshimmer gave a shattering roar and lunged at the traitor with his claws. Amund couldn't move in time and the slash that carved him open was lethal. He screamed and collapsed onto the expanding pool of his blood. The other men shared a glance: two continued firing at the enraged dragon while the others-men with some small sense of self-preservation-threw their guns away and ran for the door. I nodded to Gobber.

"Okay," I said. "Get them!" He scrambled to open the door, the screams of the dying invaders echoing as the door cracked open and security dragged the two terrified men through. They fell to their knees, begging for help and pitifully grateful for their lives. We all ducked back and Stormfly wrapped her wings around me as the door closed and Skyshimmer spat a gout of acid at us. Toothless growled at the out-of-control Changewing and it backed off a pace, still recognising the Alpha. Then the door slammed closed and I peered at the melting floor panels as Stormfly unfolded her wings from me. I rubbed her cheek affectionately.

"Thanks, girl," I said, my voice shaky. Behind me, security cuffed the men and pulled them to their feet. Gobber was staring at me and he looked…shocked. Almost as shocked as I was at what I had done. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest

"Lass…are ye okay?" he asked as I motioned security to take the men to the brig. I stared at him and then I nodded.

"Y-yes," I said quietly. "I-I think I will be. It was…worse than I thought." Gobber walked forward and patted me on the shoulder.

"They entered a dragon Pen without knowing what was in there, they wanted tae sneak in and kill us or steal the dragons and they cut off air-conditioning and life support, meaning tae trap us here tae die," he reminded me. "And ye gave them a chance tae surrender. They chose not tae. They thought they could train an enraged dragon that not even Hiccup would try! They chose tae shoot it with the Dragonroot darts!"
"Terminal stupidity," I murmured. I blinked and wiped my eyes. I regretted the deaths, even though I had rationalised them. I hoped Hiccup would understand.

"Lass?"

"I'll be fine!" I insisted, swallowing. I took a deep breath. I could do this. I had to do this because Hiccup needed me. "The base is secure. Will-restore systems to base norm. Gobber-let the General know and explain I'll see him later as well. I need to get these dragons in a Pen and fed and unsaddled. Let me know when the train gets back in." I lifted my chin. "As soon as the team is back, we go and rescue Hiccup. And end this."
The Riders of BERK are coming

I had fed and fussed Toothless and Stormfly, showered, changed and grabbed a sandwich when I walked into the infirmary. I nodded to Gothi who gave me a stern look: she wasn't keen on me seeing the General but Hiccup was his son, his only child and I was the acting commanding officer. He deserved the same consideration that we afforded every other family member of a lost Rider. So she allowed me in and I entered the little room, pausing by the door and staring at the General.

He seemed smaller, his enormous bulk diminished somehow by the crisp white sheets and standard hospital gown. His usually ruddy face was pale but his flaming red beard was still impressive and his grey-green eyes were as sharp as ever. The gentle beep of his heart monitor was reassuring. He beckoned me closer.

"I was expecting you, Lieutenant," he said, his voice firm though a little weaker than before. It was strange to hear him almost speak like a normal person.

"Here I am, sir," I replied, sitting by the bed in what my mind had categorised as 'Hiccup's Chair'.

"Gobber has already been to see me," he admitted.

"I am the acting mission and base commander," I reminded him. "I was there. You deserve to know." He stared at me and for a moment, I read fear and concern in his eyes. He did love his son, but he still hadn't got the hang of properly talking to Hiccup or showing his affection.

"Tell me," he said hoarsely. I leaned close and took his huge hand.

"It was a trap," I said sternly. "Heather communicated with us and tipped us off about the attack. We decided that we had to treat it as a possibility-in conjunction with the local security services who agreed. And there was an attack-but it was a distraction, to get us down there and away from here. Hiccup know the whole thing felt wrong but he did as a good commander should-he checked on civilian and collateral casualties-and we were trapped at gunpoint by their security and forced to the Presidential Suite."

The General frowned.

"The Russian Finance Minister…Grigori Ulmarsov, I think…was there-but he was clearly serving Drago Bludvist. We were held at gunpoint and it was obvious there would be very heavy casualties if the Team stormed the building to retrieve us. Hiccup cut a deal to make sure the dragons and I could go free."

Stoick sat up abruptly, his face ashen. "Drago has my son?" he croaked and I heard the beep of the monitor accelerate alarmingly. I tightened my grip on his hand.

"Dagur was there as well," I said, "and Drago was talking to him as if they were concluding a deal. For Hiccup. For Alvin…and Dagur." Stoick sat back, his face set.

"Dagur will torture him," he said quietly. "I-I saw…by the Loch…and Spitelout told me what happened here…under my very nose…"

"Alvin wanted the Night Fury Rider," I told him calmly. "Drago handed him over to Dagur. Hiccup looked scared-but he and I had already realised the key target was here. Drago claimed the dragons weren't important. They are: they were the whole point. They wanted the base so they could pick
them off when they returned-and kill the Riders." I paused. "Hiccup wanted one of us to get away because he knew they would be coming here. He got me away and I flew here straight because I knew they would invade the base."

Stoick looked into my face. "You were in charge?" he asked me. I nodded.

"Hiccup set the protocols in case they tried to use the backdoor that Spitelout left," I told him. "But I took the command decisions when they did. I gave them the choice-the choice that Hiccup would have offered. But I made my own choice as well and ensured there was a dragon there when they intruded into a dragon Pen."

"You left them to die if they didn't surrender," he told me. I nodded.

"I am not sorry, sir," I said quietly. "I have seen all Hiccup's wounds-his scars, his bruises, the amputation, the nightmares he suffers and the appalling lack of confidence he has as a result of all of the above. They did that to him. They chose to steal dragons and torture him. I chose not to let them get away with it."

"I agree with your decision," the General said. He paused and his eyes bored into me. "You love him, don't you?" I nodded once.

"Yes," I said softly. I knew he had told his father about his feelings for me. "The last things he said to me before I left him were 'I love you' and 'Please rescue me'. So I am going to." The General looked at me.

"How?" he asked.

"He's got a tracker implant," I revealed. "He had me put it in last night. I have one as well. Not that they would be much use against their armour-piercing bullets. But it means I know where he is. And where Alvin's base is. And that means…I can lead the attack."

He stared at me and his eyes were thoughtful. "Be very careful, Astrid," he advised me softly. "This cannot be about revenge or about anger. You have to be in control-calm and cool and thinking. Pick your team and make your plan. Use every advantage you have to outwit them. And do not stop. If you make a plan, do not second-guess yourself. I believe you can do it, Lieutenant. Go save my son."

"I will, sir," I promised. He grasped my hand and squeezed tightly.

"Thank you," he said.

oOo

Hiccup curled up tightly, his head aching and a multitude of bruises making themselves known. Alvin had lost his temper when the drug hadn't worked and the Arms Dealer had attacked the helpless Rider with his fists. Completely restrained, Hiccup had sagged, as each blow slammed into him…and it had been Dagur who had pulled Alvin away, shouting about leaving his 'brother' alone. Hiccup had just guessed that the insane traitor didn't want him killed before he got a chance. He had felt his courage almost shatter when he watched Astrid escorted away and his heart had sunk further when Drago had dispatched a group of men to capture her despite his promise. But they had returned empty-handed and the tiny surge of triumph that he had felt in that moment had steeled him against being handed over to Alvin, against Dagur's incessant pawing and threats, against whatever drug they had tried to turn him. But it meant that they were going to hurt him because their precious drug had failed. And this was what his nightmares consisted of: facing
Alvin's men, facing Dagur with no hope of rescue.

But he had hope. He had Astrid. He had Toothless. And they wouldn't fail him. He had to stay strong...stay alive...and pray to the Gods that they came in time.

Then he looked up. There was no surveillance in the room, no guard at all. They had dismissed him again, assuming he would lie whimpering from his wounds, weeping and cowering and waiting for his horrible fate…and though he was afraid because he had suffered too much at their hands not to be, he wasn't giving up either. And he was also feeling a small and unfamiliar flicker of anger at his fate. Alvin and Dagur considered him nothing more than a commodity, to be traded, a creature to be hurt, locked up or killed on a whim. So he slowly uncurled and staggered to his feet, swaying in pain. Then he quietly turned his hands over and stroked the inside of his right arm, his fingers feeling the familiar shapes and feeling a twinge of hope.

There was a concealed pouch containing fine tools that may be needed to effect emergency repairs to the prosthetic tail or gearing mechanisms if they failed away from base. The men who had captured him had done a really poor job of patting him down and he flipped up the sealed flap and eased out a fine screwdriver, walking slowly to the door and kneeling down by the lock, carefully unscrewing the mechanism and removing the lock completely. He smiled and slid the screwdriver back into the pouch: his tools were concealed over evidence of his greatest despair. He carefully opened the door, listened outside, then slid out.

Quickly, he walked down the corridor as quietly as he could manage, every sense straining and green eyes wide with concern. He had to try to get out of here. After all, if they caught him, what more could they do? They were going to torture him anyway…he really had nothing to lose. But as he pressed himself into a narrow gap behind a cabinet as two guards walked past, he still closed his eyes and prayed:

Oh Thor-please let Astrid come in time…

I studied the topography of Hiccup's location with Gobber, Will and the General—much to Gothi's displeasure, though I did successfully argue that he wouldn't rest soundly knowing his son was in danger and feeling he was in on the mission would make him easier to manage. She had reluctantly agreed to the last point, implying he had been all but impossible during the Birmingham mission. His and Gobber's experience was vital in planning the operation, suggesting personnel and timing. They looked to me for details of dragon flight patterns and capabilities and I was surprised how much I had picked up in my short time in BERK. I felt embarrassed that I wasn't Hiccup—he would have been so much more confident and knowledgeable—but they were very patient with me, which made me feel worse.

Will was able to confirm that Drago Bludvist's jet had landed for a short time in Glasgow airport and then had taken off to his base in Akureyri, Iceland while Alvin had travelled in one car to the address that Ozzie had worked out from the materials they had needed to create their Skrill Pen. Satellite imagery was restricted of the area but the General was able to pull some favours and get a very secret military satellite to run us a few pictures—and the images detailed the fact that there was a heavy security presence on the estate. There were motion sensors on the fences, cameras on the approach roads and a security barracks attached to the main complex.

The General and Gobber had frowned at the heavy security presence and I felt my heart sink but I was not going to back down: they had Hiccup and they assumed we were in disarray. But we were secure, all their malware had been disabled and their invaders were dead or imprisoned. We had the full complement of dragons and riders and some very crazy individuals that they could not be
"Sir," I said, "I think I have a way in. They are completely set up for a conventional attack. They have cameras, motion sensors and men—all at ground level. So we come in at night and on dragons. They have only one left now—Dagur's Skrill. Vorg and Savage are dead and we have reclaimed their dragons so we have the aerial advantage."

"Air superiority," Stoick murmured.

"Won the Battle of Britain," I replied. "And will win the battle of Alvin. Part of the team will deal with Dagur and the security team—and the rest will enter for the rescue and—if possible—we'll try to apprehend Alvin."

"Hiccup is your priority," Stoick reminded me and I nodded.

"I know, sir," I said quietly. "God, I couldn't know that more. I hate the idea that he is in there and in danger. He stayed because he knew if the team stormed the Penthouse to get us out, there would be heavy casualties on both sides. He stayed to let me get away. Your son is an idiot!" My tone was angry and I had balled my fists. I found myself breathing really hard. "He puts himself in danger in preference to anyone else." I shook my head and tried to calm down. "I don't know. He is such an amazing person and yet he thinks he's worthless. I do everything I can to make him understand how special he is to me and I think he gets it…but he's been beaten down for years and a few weeks of me don't seem to be enough…" Stoick looked at me and his lips lifted in a smile.

"Hmm. You have already had a powerful effect on him," he told me. "He's already more confident, more decisive and more effective. He's become the leader of the Riders he never was before."

"Lad still needs a big shot of confidence," Gobber commented dryly. "Though he is certainly coming along well with the lass!" I cringed at the gesture he made while winking suggestively.

"And he was always the quickest and smartest in IT," Will added unexpectedly. "Most of what makes this place run are his protocols, his modifications to previous systems. He undid in an afternoon what Spitelout had done to the base systems over years!" Stoick winced.

"And he's my boyfriend and the man I love," I declared. "I'll bring him back safely…" And then my com beeped. I looked up. "The train has arrived," I murmured as Snotlout's voice sounded angrily over the com link.

"Okay—where is everyone?" he asked. "Why is no one here to meet us? Why is the station still on emergency lighting? What's going on?"

oOo

We rode out en masse after dark with all the Riders. Bucket came along on Oggy, his Whispering Death (don't ask me why it was called that—I really don't know) while Mulch, whose Snow Wraith dragon Blanche had been stolen by Heather, was on Stormfly because I was still flying Toothless. I had armed all the Riders—even the twins, God help me!—with tranquilliser guns because though we were flying in and were planning to avoid as much conventional combat as possible, there would be a ground assault as we went through the base. And that was why we weren't attacking alone. All of us—except me—had an armed security guard sitting behind us, dressed in full combat gear. We were going in with ground support to get Hiccup out—and put Alvin out of business.

I leaned forward, adjusting the tail as we skimmed the trees, the rest of the Riders flying hard at my back. Toothless crooned as I shifted my weight: he knew we were going for Hiccup and I could
feel the tension in his powerful body. I felt the weight of the weapons I had grabbed—my trank gun and a conventional pistol—on my hip because I would be damned if I allowed anything else to happen to my Hiccup. "Fish? Distance?" I muttered over the com.

"Ten miles," he reported. "We are below radar and there are no active radar sources anyway. Our scans show their motion sensors are trained at ground level: we won't register if we remain above fifteen feet. Thermals don't show any guards on perimeter patrol. But they show two dragons in the west wing."

"Hopefully the Skrill and Blanche," I murmured. "Look alive, Team. Final approach!" And I leaned low over Toothless as the Monstrous Nightmares took flank on either side of us, with my beautiful Stormfly a place back. The com chatter had died and I knew everyone had their game face on: for once, we were on the offensive. We had the advantage: the Riders of BERK were coming.

Hiccup found that a lifetime of being bullied and picked on meant he was better than average at moving quietly and avoiding being seen. His black riding suit helped him stick in the shadows and he managed to steer clear of guards—so far. But he had no clue where he was going and as he wandered round the brightly lit corridors in the lower level, he realised he was no closer to getting out. He needed a map.

He heard the clump of feet and he shrank back but there was no obvious cover: in desperation, he ducked into a doorway and felt the handle give. Offering up a quick prayer, he slid into the room and closed the door behind him, resting back against it and staring into the gloomy room. He remained tense and taut until the steps receded—and then his eyes widened as he saw the computer, unlocked at the desk by the wall. Quietly, he flipped the door lock closed and limped to the desk, slid into the seat and entered Alvin's system.

It became very obvious that Alvin's Outcast Holdings had an enormous number of legitimate and some very illegal subsidiaries and Hiccup found himself with astonishing access to all of them. He pulled up the basic schematic of the base and winced as he saw the heavily guarded entrances and the barracks and took a long breath. He was safer staying put and doing what mischief he could—because he knew that Astrid was coming. Then he downloaded details of the major subsidiaries—Perfidia, Maiestra, Eversio, Profugus—and forwarded the details of company operations, illegal transactions and deals and financial records (all tied to Alvin) to the National Crime Agency, the National Security Agency, the National Fraud Office, MI5, MI6 and the Times. He sent a copy to his email as well and then he paused.

His hands flew over the keys and he systematically set to work disabling their security systems, blinding cameras and locking doors open. He knew he had limited time because his tampering would eventually be uncovered so he turned his attentions to the one way he could hurt Alvin as much as the man had hurt him: he accessed Outcast Holdings' and Alvin's personal bank accounts. He stared at the huge numbers facing him and then felt a shiver run down his spine: every single dollar of the sum represented lives ruined and immeasurable harm done. His hands fisted and he stared at the screen, breathing hard. Then he rapidly began typing, cracking security and engineering a series of transfers of enormous sums out of the accounts. If Alvin hadn't noticed him before, by Odin, he would now!

He wasn't surprised but he was scared as he heard steps approach so he stabbed in the last few commands and slapped the ENTER button before dashing to wrench the door open at the other side of the room—then sneak and hide behind the main door as it slammed open. He hugged the
door to himself as he heard three men enter and scarcely dared to breathe. They saw the screen, the
spun chair and the open door and drew the conclusions they were meant to.

"THAT WAY!" He heard the steps recede and he paused, listened, then slid round the door and
took two steps into the corridor.

The click of a gun froze him in his tracks. He felt his pulse accelerate at the hated and feared voice:

"Hello, brother. You've been very bad, haven't you? I think it's time for your punishment."
The Complex came into sight on our Night Vision and I swept the Team round in a tight, low level pass. "Everyone ready?" I shouted.

"Chill, LT," Snotlout called. "These bastards aren't gonna know what's hit them!" I managed a small smile.

"Team One: Snot, Gustav and twins-attack!" I commanded and the dragons swooped low, dropping off their security personnel before the Monstrous Nightmares flamed up and the twins whooped and arrowed down, focussed like never before. The area we had identified as the barracks and security centre suddenly exploded as three dragons slammed into the building. The explosion the twins caused ripped the side wall off one of the buildings and lights exploded all over the building.

"Team Two: Bucket, Mulch, Cami-get those dragons! Especially Blanche!" I added, flipping Toothless over the main building and aiming him at a security camera. I felt the sudden build up of pressure and then he flipped round and coughed a purple jet of plasma that annihilated the camera with pinpoint accuracy. The second team spiralled down, taking out all cameras and anyone stupid enough to get in their way. Stormfly was willingly spraying spines at the half dozen idiotic guards who ran at the dragons and I saw Mulch patting her gently. He was a short, round and very hairy man who was preternaturally nice and patient with his larger and simpler older brother. I knew he missed Blanche horribly and hoped they could get her free quickly—then I could have my girl back. They dropped off their security escorts and they ran in our direction.

"Boys-with me!" I shouted as we swooped down to the main building, picking off all the camera and defensive points and any guards who ran out and sprayed machine gun rounds at us. I was actually getting pretty fed up of being shot at and I knew Eret was as well. Fishlegs had his game face on and looked surprisingly serious for such a quiet and gentle man. Meatlug, his adorable Gronckle, was also looking serious and coughed a huge dollop of lava at the main entrance, literally melting the doors open! Toothless enlarged the opening with another plasma blast as we swooped around and another five men rushed out. Eret knocked them out with a blast from his dragon.

I soared up on Toothless and viewed the battle as another explosion sounded, accompanied with screaming. The twins had now demolished the barracks completely and the Monstrous Nightmares were harrying any guard stupid enough to fire at them. The enemy casualties were mounting rapidly and I could hear the exchange of gunfire as our security met the defenders. I could hear shouting—and some cursing—over the com as Snotlout took charge of his team and deployed them effectively.

"All good, Snot?" I asked and I heard an explosion over the com.

"Son of a Half-troll!" Ruff exclaimed as they flipped through an expanding fireball. "That was HUGE!"

"NUTS ROCK!" Tuff screamed happily as their Zippleback blasted a jeep apart.

"Hey, this is doing wonders for my stress levels!" he shouted back over the com. "Things are under control here, Lieutenant! Go get my cuz!"

"Team three-let's go in!" I ordered as we swooped down and Toothless exploded into the main lobby with the other two at my back. Defenders shot at us and a flurry of dragons wings shielded us...
as we snatched our trank guns and exchanged fire. Then a burst of rifle-fire echoed in the lobby as Sergeant Grimsdaal led a trio of security from outside who outflanked the defenders.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant!" he shouted. "We'll sort these guys! Green squad-you're with the Officer!"

"We'll leave you some support!" I shouted, nodding to Eret and Fishlegs. We dashed forward into the corridor but left Meatlug and Skullcrusher in the hall, guarding our retreat. Toothless bounded alongside us as our security guards dismounted and came with us, leaving the others clearing the entrance. I know there was no way that the Night Fury was going to stay away from his beloved Rider. I pressed myself against the wall as we reached a junction, lifted my weapon and motioned the others to do so as well. Then I turned to the Night Fury as I heard security shoot a couple of hostiles in the left hand corridor as the dragon looked up at me.

"Toothless-it's up to you now," I said. "Find Hiccup."

Hiccup was almost thrown into Alvin's office, stumbling and slamming onto the floor. He lay sprawled for a long moment before Dagur fist his hair and hauled him to his feet, twisting his left arm agonisingly behind his back. The traitor shoved him towards Alvin and the Arms Dealer narrowed his eyes.

"Your idiot security let him get out and wander through your base!" Dagur told him furiously.

"And you recaptured 'im without much problem!" Alvin growled.

"He was found in one of the offices," Dagur hissed at him. Alvin folded his arms. "He's an IT tech! He was in your systems! Gods only know what he's done!" And then Alvin turned to Hiccup and grabbed his face, glaring furiously into the bruised face.

"What the fuck 'ave yer done!" he roared. Hiccup gave a very small smile.

"Made you the greatest philanthropist in history," he said thickly, swallowing. Alvin glared at him-then ran to his desk and his thick fingers frantically played over the frictionless screen built into the marble desk and called up his accounts. Dagur forced his prisoner forward and Hiccup watched breathlessly as Alvin reached his personal accounts…

…and then he gave the most blood-curdling scream. The man looked over to Hiccup with eyes filled only with murder and snatched a huge knife.

"You'll never get it back if you kill me!" Hiccup quickly said in a breathless voice. Alvin grabbed his hair from Dagur and pressed the knife hard into Hiccup's neck.

"Where's me money, boy?" Alvin roared. Hiccup flinched but the prospect of imminent and inevitable torture and death was giving him courage that he hadn't realised he possessed.

"Now, that's hardly going to work," he breathed, afraid to move because he could feel the edge nicking his skin. "I'm not gonna help you if you just cut my throat anyway. There has to be some sort of bargain…"

Dagur wrenched his arm even tighter across his back, way past the point of pain and only just shy of breaking point. "You were saying?" he threatened as Hiccup groaned.

"Maybe…you should ask…Al…if he wants to lose three hundred…and seventy-two…million…dollars…or not…" Hiccup gasped, grimacing. Dagur stared at him-then at Alvin, who was
demolishing his computer screen with his fist. Then Alvin turned murderously to Hiccup.

"Okay, Dagur-yer gets ter do what yer wants with 'im," he growled. "But I wanna watch. I wanna see every last thing you do to this little bastard. I want ter hear every scream yer get from 'im. And I wanna know where me money is and where that fucking dragon is!" Hiccup breathed painfully and stared at them in despair.

"T-toothless?" he groaned. "Al-you know I'm never handing him over…" Alvin punched him brutally.

"Yer give me money back-or I get yer dragon!" Alvin roared. "Drago will give me two 'undred million for 'im…so it's yer choice!" Hiccup shook his head and blinked.

"No choice at all…" he groaned as an explosion rocked the entire complex. Then another. Hiccup looked up and gave a very small smile. "Cavalry's arrived," he added. Alvin glared at Dagur.

"I thought yer men were supposed to 'ave taken care of the Riders-permanently!" he hissed. Dagur rolled his eyes.

"Actually, I thought we were all your men!" he sneered. "And it looks like they failed. I should've know Drago's plan was dragon dung!"

"It were yer plan ter destroy the Riders!"

"Actually, Al-you were in charge!" Dagger sneered, his hand wrenching Hiccup's left wrist higher between his shoulder blades. He gasped.

"It netted this little fish," Alvin gloated and grabbed Hiccup's face again. "And yer will give me yer dragon, 'Iccup, or I will make yer life a livin' 'Ell!" Another explosion rocked the building.

"If you still have a chance when they have finished," Hiccup gulped. Alvin slapped him again.

"Dagur-get out there! We need yer dragon! If 'Iccup is 'ere. 'is dragon won't be!"

"And none of those other dragons can resist my Deathwing!" Dagger scoffed. He shoved Hiccup into Alvin's arms. "Take good care of him, Al! I don't want him too damaged before I get to have my fun with him!" He ran for the door as Alvin dragged Hiccup close.

"'E didn't say undamaged," he growled and Hiccup tried to struggle. "Unless yer want ter hand over me money?" Hiccup swallowed.

"How much do you want your money back, Al?" he murmured. "What are you going to give?" Alvin threw him across the room and he impacted hard against the floor. He groaned.

"Nothing!" Alvin growled and grabbed his knife. "It's what I'm going ter take that should worry yer!"

oOo

Toothless had got the scent and was galloping through the base. Eret, Fishlegs and I—with our trio of security—were advancing steadily, taking out any defenders who met us. Toothless was particularly effective at swatting men aside, ready to be tranked safely. I glanced over to Eret and he checked the base schematic.

"The room we presumed was Alvin's Office is up ahead," he confirmed as Toothless accelerated.
Another explosion rocked the building and we heard steps ahead. We saw a shape accelerating away towards the west wing and I nodded and sent Eret and the security men after him: it had looked like Dagur. I beckoned to Fish, who was panting, as we sprinted up an internal staircase and galloped along the wide, carpeted corridor. This was clearly the residential zone: I caught a huge living room to my left with panoramic views across the countryside-currently displaying a swooping Hookfang and burning trees. But Toothless was determinedly racing to the far end of the corridor and a heavy dark oak door.

We arrived and heard voices within—the low growl I recognised from the huge man by the loch—and the tight, slightly nasal tone of Hiccup, sounding in pain. I stood back.

"Toothless," I said, "go get him!"

The door exploded as the Night Fury blasted it to matchwood with his plasma blast and he erupted into the room, his back arched and eyes slitted, growing very menacingly. I danced in after him, my gun raised as I saw Hiccup sprawled on the floor, his face bruised and looking shocked. The huge shape of Alvin with his enormous black beard and wild jet hair ducked back behind the desk—and vanished into a concealed door in the wall.

"Fish-cover the door!" I ordered and threw myself to my knees by Hiccup, who was already stroking Toothless—who unsurprisingly had got to him first. "Hiccup?" I asked and he snapped his head round to look at me—and then he almost threw himself at me, his arms wrapping fiercely around me and face burying into my shoulder. I returned the hug, slightly cautious because I didn’t know if he was hurt, but he was pressed hard against me, all his strength in his embrace so I reckoned it was safe.

"Thank Thor," he murmured, moving his head and kissing my cheek. I leaned against him and nuzzled him tenderly.

"God, I was worried," I murmured, relishing the reassurance of feeling him in my arms again. "Are you okay?" He pulled away slightly so he could stare into my eyes. There were fresh bruises on his face but there was an unfamiliar triumphant light in his eyes.

"Better than okay," he murmured, resting his head against mine. "I have seriously inconvenienced Alvin…" I smiled.

"Was that why he was holding a knife?" I asked him and he managed a lopsided smile.

"Er, yeah?" he admitted. "I think he was going to cut a lot of pieces off me very slowly until I gave up where his money is."

"Hiccup?" I frowned. He kissed me again though his hug tightened around me for a moment, telling me everything I needed to know.

"Later. I think we should get out of here," he said quietly. "Dagur is on the loose and he will be going for the Skrill…" I helped him to his feet. He was unsteady and his arm automatically wound around my shoulders.

"And Alvin looks to have got away…" I sighed. Hiccup gave a small smile.

"Night Furies have an excellent sense of smell," he said softly. "Bud-can you find Alvin for me?" The dragon gave a little warble, licked Hiccup's face solemnly and then went and sniffed at the desk. He put his head down and sniffed against the wall, then backed away and threw himself at the door. It clanged but stood firm. Hiccup limped forward and laid a hand on the surface.
"Armoured," he murmured. "C'mon, bud-you can do this…" Toothless sniffed around, then headed out the door. Hiccup followed him and I was at his side. I pressed my pistol into his hand. He started and looked at me.

"Yeah, I know," I sighed. "But I have armed everyone for this mission."

"Even the twins?" he asked. I rolled my eyes.

"Yes-though if they have tranquillised each other, I wouldn't be surprised," I sighed. "That is the only conventional weapon." He stared into my eyes and then blinked.

"Astrid…"

"I can't lose you," I said abruptly. "I won't lose you." His hand reached for mine.

"You won't," he promised me as we trotted down the stairs after the dragon. Fishlegs brought up the rear, breathing hard and covering our backs.

"If you see a bad guy-point and shoot!" I reminded him. His grip tightened on mine.

"Only if you don't get 'em first," he said quietly. "I know my limits, Astrid."

We moved quietly and cautiously after Toothless, Fishlegs and I on alert as we had Hiccup with us. The Night Fury was on the trail and Hiccup was sticking close to me, clearly hurt but determined to bring this to the end. I lifted my com and flipped the channel open. "Eret? Where are you?"

"We lost him before the dragon pens," he reported. "I've commed Bucket and Mulch. They have Blanche back. She, Oggy and Stormfly are outside with them, close to the main entrance, waiting."

"Alvin is on the move," I told him. "Keep your eyes peeled and head back to the main entrance. He'll be going for a car!" I turned and looked at Hiccup. "Shall we go?" He paused and shook his head.

"I need a computer!" he said suddenly and dived away to one side. I rolled my eyes.

"Now he wants to be the hero!" I sighed and followed him. After shooting the lock off thee doors, we found a computer and Hiccup instantly threw himself into a seat and logged in, searching the system and locating the file he wanted. I watched him download the information and forward it to me, Gothi and his own email address. Then he rose.

"Let's go," he murmured. I nodded, then threw him back at the snap of a machine gun bolt sliding into place. Bullets slammed into the wall above us. I peered outside and saw a brace of guards, imagining they had pinned us down. I glanced at Hiccup and he turned to the Night Fury. "Bud? Wanna help us out?" he asked. The dragon gave a little croon and darted forward, exhaling a moderate plasma blast and knocking both men unconscious.

"Good work," I said and patted him on the shoulder, before leading my team out at a crouch. Hiccup remained directly behind me, as determined not to let anything happen to me as I was to keep him safe. We rounded a corner-and then Toothless began to growl furiously. And then we heard it-the rumble of thunder and the whitish-pink flash of lightning across the clear night sky. Dagur had got to the Skrill and they were up and waiting for us. Hiccup sighed and swung into the saddle but I ran forward and grabbed him. "Oh no, Commander Dragon Boy-you are not going up there to face that lunatic!" His emerald green eyes met my own and there was a quiet determination in there, mixed with resignation.
"If I don't stop him now, Astrid, he'll keep on coming. And he has already harmed me too much to let go," he said in a voice that held something I didn't want to hear. He hated Dagur-and that sounded wrong coming from his lips.

"You're not going up there alone," I told him severely. "Not without me!"

"Or me," Fishlegs added determinedly. We stared at him in shock: his was pretty much the slowest dragon but he was as determined to support us as well.

"Was someone trying to leave without me?" Eret called, running up with the security team at his back. "I thought we were a team, Lieutenant."

"We are," I said, locking eyes with Hiccup as he clipped his foot into Toothless's tail control. He stared at me and his face hardened.

"And if I ordered you all to stay on the ground?" he asked sharply.

"Then you would have to cite us all for insubordination-sir," I told him briskly, my face equally determined. His face relaxed.

"Get your dragon!" he told me with a small smile. "He's waiting-and he doesn't do waiting!" I raced for the door, with Toothless bouncing after me and whistled. Stormfly raced forward, cawing and cooing her excitement at being reunited with me. I swung into the saddle and leaned low over her neck.

"C'mon, girl-it's time to do this thing!" I murmured as Toothless crooned proudly and Hiccup glanced up at me. I tossed him his com and he smiled and clipped it in.

"Let's go!" he called. "All Riders-take to the air and engage Dagur. He is your priority: the security detail can deal with any remaining ground forces."

"Roger," I confirmed.

"Good to have you back, cuz!" Snotlout called.

"What's the plan?" Cami called. I saw Hiccup lean low over Toothless's neck, then give a little smile.

"The Team's favourite: rush the bad guy and blow shit up!" he said and I could hear the smirk in his voice. And the Toothless flung them into the air, his huge wings accelerating the pair into the air with Stormfly a wingbeat behind. I heard the others launch and the laugh of the traitor amid the lightning crackling overhead.

"At last, brother—it's time you took your punishment like a man!" I glanced over at Hiccup and saw his face tighten.

"No, Dagur," he shouted back. "It's finally time you got yours!" And then he threw Toothless into a tight turn and the Night Fury launched a huge plasma blast at the Skrill, blasting the dragon backwards. Dagur screamed and blasted a huge swathe of lightning that arched towards Toothless and the rest of the team. Fanghook recklessly barrelled towards the Skrill and blasted flames at the dragon. Dagur screamed in fury and tried to blast the youngest rider away. I heard him cry out and Fanghook plummet from the sky. Snotlout zoomed round and picked the lad up before he hit as a cloud of green gas billowed around the Skrill while the twins continued to circle around the dragon. Hiccup signalled and we backed away as Dagur tried to hit him with another blast of lightning-and the explosive gas ignited, blasting the dragon back in a wild tumble.
Hiccup was instantly after him, flipping Toothless into a tight attack run and hitting the disorientated Skrill with another huge plasma blast. The dragon screamed and plummeted as Dagur roared at us.

"I WILL EAT YOUR HEART!"

"You really need to look at that diet," Hiccup murmured, swooping past them-as lightning arched around and hit him. His scream was painful to hear and Fishlegs launched a series of lava blasts at the Skrill. The dragon had barely batted them away before Eret's Rumblehorn coughed a large ball of fire at him and Snotlout joined in with a long blast of flame. I had Stormfly pepper them with a huge spread of spines as well and was rewarded with a cry from Dagur. He flipped the dragon around and barrelled straight at me. I could see the madness in his pale eyes and the blood soaking around the spine in his leg.

"Hiccup!" I called, dodging away from the Skrill. He raised his head.

"M'okay," he said though he sounded weary. "Insulated suits-remember?" Lightning arched round me and I cast him an exasperated glance.

"Yeah right!" I grumbled and flipped my girl round, reaching for my trank gun. "Little help here?"

"All over it, Princess!" Snotlout called cockily and swooped around the Skrill. The twins buzzed it again and as Dagur cursed them and Cami, who appeared behind him and had her dragon also fire at him, I flipped Stormfly and took my shot, emptying the clip of trank darts into the dragon. Most crackled off the electrical field but two impacted on the grey and purple beast and I saw the mad slitted pupils dilate and the tension ooze from its body. Dagur felt the relaxation immediately and fixed me with a psychotic look. Then he grabbed his knife and threw himself at me as the Skrill dropped from the sky.

"YOU!" he screamed. "YOU KILLED MY BABY!"

He hit me directly and almost knocked me from saddle-and then I found myself wrestling desperately to keep the traitor off me as my gun spiralled from my hands. He was very strong and I found the knife pressing inexorably towards my throat, despite very effort I could put in. I leaned sideways and my girl responded, banking us downwards towards the building.

"Hiccup," I breathed.

The whine of the Night Fury's wings cutting through the air sounded and Dagur lifted his head for a moment. "At last, brother-you can watch me kill your little pet girl before I have you!" he hissed. The knife was almost at my throat now and I tried to find any more strength to push him away-but there was nothing more. I closed my eyes.

The report of a gun sounded-and another-then five more. I felt Dagur jerk against me and the tip of the knife sliced my skin-and then I felt something warm spray across my face. I suddenly felt him stop pushing and opened my eyes-to see a bullet hole in his forehead. His pallid green eyes were staring and I screamed and pushed him away. He fell backwards and dropped away, limp and already dead, towards the ground below, I tugged on the saddle and dragged my Nadder away from the imminent impact into the side of the building and we looped around the hovering Night Fury and Hiccup still sitting, motionless, the pistol still clasped in his hands in the same grip I had taught him. I lifted Stormfly up, swiping the blood off my face, and we hovered right alongside.

I reached over and took the gun from his hands, thumbing the safety on.
"It's okay," I said quietly. "I'm glad I took you on at least one successful date. I think it saved my life." He was breathing hard and I could see him still in shock. He had never killed anyone himself before. "Hiccup?" I asked cautiously. "Are you okay?" He blinked and slowly looked up.

"I almost hit you," he breathed.

"These suits are Kevlar," I reminded him. "They're pretty bulletproof-and I was covered by Dagur anyway…" He was shaking and he looked at his trembling hands.

"Is he dead?" he asked slowly.

"Well, if blowing his brains out didn't kill him, the fall would," I reassured him, staring down at the crumpled body on the ground. He closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ozzie," he murmured.

"Sorry to break this up-but is anyone interested in the car that's breaking the limit towards the main gate?" Eret shouted over the com. I glanced at Hiccup in the flickering light of the burning complex. He was ashen but his eyes glittered.

"Alvin," he breathed then looked to me. "Come on!" he said with new determination. "Let's get him!"

"Okay Team!" I shouted. "GET THAT CAR!"

The Team formed up behind us as we accelerated away from the catastrophe that was the remains of the complex, chasing the red rear lights that were receding at pace into the frigid darkness. I flipped my night vision visor on and could see the car as clear as day. We were closing and I nodded to Hiccup, pulling ahead of the car. We banked round, him playing follow the leader to me and we both unleashed blasts into the road, obliterating it ahead of the car. The brakes screamed and the vehicle fishtailed, then spun as it screamed to halt off the road, tyres biting deep into the muddy lawn. Alvin leapt out, sticking close to the vehicle. I felt rather than saw another dragon pull alongside us, on the other side of Hiccup: it was Snotlout. The others all hovered in a circle around the car and prisoner.

"ALVIN TINDALL!" Hiccup shouted. "You are under arrest for kidnapping, attempted murder and treason!"

"And yer goin' ter take me in, are yer, boy?" he sneered.

"Only if I have to," he muttered. "SURRENDER! AND STEP AWAY FROM THE CAR!"

"If yer insist!" he snarled and did so-slapping the rocket launcher from the car onto his shoulder in the same movement. We all had the same thought and I heard Hiccup shouting to Toothless as I screamed at Stormfly and Snotlout's voice also bellowed an order. I saw Alvin's finger flip the safety off and snatch at the trigger-as we all fired.

The rocket hadn't even got out of the tube as three dragons' worth of flame and plasma impacted into it and the man holding it. The explosion consumed Alvin, the car and the surrounding road. We were all knocked backwards and I clung ferociously to the saddle as Stormfly backwinged and squawked in furious indignation: I soothed her as best I could-while checking on Hiccup and Snotlout. Both looked shaken but fine and then we looked down into the crater, the burning wreckage of the car and the charred and shattered body of the man we had chased and fought for so long. Who had done such terrible damage to BERK and to Hiccup.
"Team-go and fetch our security detail, please?" I asked as Hiccup landed by the wreckage and I set down by him. Toothless was crooning in worry and I was equally concerned as the others flapped back to collect the rest of the mission staff and the tranquillised Skrill. I slid off and walked over to him after petting Stormfly affectionately for her work: she had saved me again. I stopped by Hiccup and reached for him. "Are you okay?" I asked in a low voice. He robotically unclipped his leg from the pedal and swung his leg over the saddle. He stood shakily.

"They're both dead?" he asked me, seeking confirmation. I took his hand and walked him around the crater, to see the wreckage of Alvin 'the Treacherous'. He paled and had to swallow twice not to vomit.

"He's not coming back from that, babe," I told him gently and then he wrapped his arms around me, burying his head in my neck and seeking comfort. I hugged him tightly this time, feeling him trembling. It had been very bloody.

"Thank you," he murmured, lifting his head up and gently kissing me. "I knew you'd come." I smiled in relief and kissed him harder. He was warm and alive and I was insanely grateful for that.

"Better believe it, Dragon Boy," I told him. "You aren't getting rid of me that easily!" He kissed me again, his eyes locking with mine.

"Don't ever wanna lose you," he said. "Milady. My Astrid."
The Hatching Pit

I was exhausted when I was finally allowed off duty. It had been crazy since the end of the battle, with dragons, casualties and corpses all jostling for attention.

We had sustained casualties in the attack: two severely injured with gunshot wounds, two hit with Auris draconis darts and critically ill and three lesser gunshot wounds. Apart from the unconscious Skrill, all the dragons were fine and Mulch was beside himself in quiet joy at being reunited with Blanche. Hiccup was relieved to be back with Toothless once more.

It had been hectic before we left: I was working with Fish, Ruff and Bucket to stabilise the injured for transfer while Snotlout and Eret had swept the base and secured the perimeter. Hiccup had taken Tuff and downloaded everything from the system he needed before wiping the evidence from computers, security cameras and any other devices. Then Tuff had set some charges and blown the remains of the building to hell.

We had taken the corpses of Alvin and Dagur with us when we returned to BERK. Dagur went on the morgue with his twin brother while we put Alvin's remains on ice as well. Hiccup and I both felt this was one for the General to discuss with our backers. To be frank, it was way above our pay grade.

Hiccup, Snotlout, Gustav and I had flown back with the four most seriously wounded because our dragons were the fastest. But even so, one was becoming very unstable by the time we hit the main garage and I had to hand over to and help the waiting trauma teams when we arrived. I snatched a quick glance across at my boyfriend and he gave me a reassuring nod before I turned back to intubate the security guard as he crashed.

The infirmary had been hectic with the volume of casualties. Gothi had gone into surgery with the major gunshot wounds leaving Ragnar and I running the rest. Both the Auris draconis victims were intubated and in a coma and the minor injuries were relatively straightforward but time-consuming. At one point I thought I saw Hiccup having his wounds treated by the techs but I was suturing. When I looked up, he was gone.

Back at my room, I dumped my flight suit-I had changed into scrubs on arrival—and cast my bed a longing look. But I wanted to check Hiccup was okay so I dragged myself down the hall. Pausing, I rapped on his door but there was no answer: he was probably asleep...but then I recalled the look on his face after he shot Dagur and I knew he didn't want to be alone.

"Location of Commander Haddock," I murmured into my com.

"Commander Haddock is in stairwell B," came the computerised voice. I glanced around and then headed for the stairs. It was the set closest to my room actually, though I had wandered down the flight by the infirmary in my exhausted daze. I opened the door and peered on. I saw him immediately. He was sitting on the top stair, his feet two steps down and his body resting against the bannister. I stared at him: his head was bowed and he was breathing slowly, heavily. I hoped he was asleep and felt guilty because he was waiting for me.

"Hiccup?" I asked gently. He jerked and his eyes snapped open, the forest green depths momentarily startled before they swung up to stare at me—and then he smiled. His bruised face warmed with the expression and I lunged forward to wrap my arms around him as he rose and embraced me fiercely. His lips found mine, fierce with need and I returned the kiss desperately. Finally, we broke and I hugged him tightly, feeling his head nuzzle my shoulder as his lips ghosted
my cheek again. "Why are you here?" I asked him softly. He sighed.

"I was waiting for you but I thought it was seriously pathetic to just sit outside your door like a homeless kid," he murmured, his tone embarrassed.

"So you thought you'd wait for me at the top of the stairs..." I murmured, a small smile on my lips. He sighed.

"Um...yeah...not quite as publicly pathetic," he sighed as I looked up into his face. There was sorrow in his eyes—exactly what I expected. Hiccup was a good man, a generous, kind, patient human being. He had suffered way beyond where most would have broken but he had finally killed Dagur, his worst tormentor, only because the man was trying to murder me. He killed Dagur for me, not for himself, though he had suffered so horribly at the man's hands. And he felt horribly guilty at the act. I pressed my hands against his cheeks and forced him to stare into my eyes and smiled gently.

"Are you okay?" I asked him carefully. He gave a weary shrug.

"Um, I expect so," he said evasively which, of course, meant no. I slid my fingers into his messy auburn hair as I felt his hands slide down my back and gently grasp my waist.

"Liar," I teased him and he dipped his head.

"You don't know everything that Dagur did to me," he said wearily, "but I regret killing him. He was Ozzie's brother and though he was a psychopath and sadist, I would have saved him because Heather probably needed him if she is to stand any chance of fully recovering. But then he tried to kill you and I..." He blinked.


"I would give my life for you, Milady," he murmured. "I love you."

"Come to bed," I murmured, pulling him towards the door. "You're exhausted and still in shock. Babe—you handed yourself over to Drago this morning to save me and I really can't tell you how scared I was I would lose you." He paused and his hands tightened on my waist. His lips gently sought mine and I leaned into the brief kiss gratefully. Then he followed me back to my room, his face weary and I knew he had been waiting for me because he didn't want to be alone. I pulled him in and locked the door, then gave him a small kiss. He rested his head against mine and he sighed.

"You should get a better boyfriend," he told me. I tossed my scrubs aside and dragged on a baggy T-shirt unselfconsciously.

"Nah—you're the one I want," I sighed and slid into bed. He sat achingly on the edge of the bed and paused.

"I...er..." he began and I gently stroked a hand down his rigid back. He didn't have anything else to sleep in: the flight suit was way too bulky and uncomfortable to rest in.

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"I've seen it all before, babe—and I don't care," I told him tiredly. I really wanted him in my arms. He nodded and slowly unzipped his flight suit, then slid it down, leaving him in his boxers and thoroughly self-conscious. He kicked off his boot and the black flight suit and slid into bed, unstrapping his prosthesis as the last thing one-handed. He was black and blue with bruises from his captivity and his scars were still red and ugly but his lanky arms wrapped around me comfortingly and I felt him scooch down, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. I snuggled up to him and rested my head on his chest. "I'm glad to have you back, babe," I murmured, feeling him...
press against me and recalling how shocked he had been after Donald 'Dogsbreath' had died.

"I was praying you would get me," he murmured, closing his eyes wearily, "but we both know why I had to get you away. Did they come?" I nodded and closed my eyes. I really didn't want to talk about it right now.

"Yeah," I sighed and fidgeted into position. "In the morning, babe. I'm knackered." I felt him snuggle by me as I fell asleep.

I woke slowly, warm and cramped by my snoring pillow. I sighed and tried to drop back off, but his last statement before I went to sleep came back to me. Did they come? That was something I really hadn't wanted to discuss with him so soon and my mind began to whirl with images from that horrible episode. I could rationalise every action I did but still...I closed my eyes and fidgeted but the snores had stopped and I realised he was awake. His hand moved and I opened my eyes to see his smile.

"Morning, Milady," he murmured, his tone warm and gentle. He sounded relaxed.

"Morning, babe," I said distantly and I felt him shift. I felt the tension zing through me and I felt so awkward because I knew he would want to know what had happened. And I never wanted those glorious green eyes shadowed by disappointment in me.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly. I could hear the worry in his voice and his brow furrowed lightly. I knew his forest green gaze would be concerned so I stared stubbornly at the ceiling.

"I really don't want to talk about it," I told him more sharply than I meant. He hitched himself up on one elbow and looked at me carefully.

"Astrid—you know you can talk to me, right?" he asked me gently. "You've listened when I have been utterly pathetic and quite frankly you are amazing and I probably won't be of any help...but I want to try..." I swallowed. I knew he tended to panic, overthink things and assume the worst where any social interaction was concerned and I dimly realised that I was going to hurt him but I was hurting as well and beginning to panic because I would have to own up to what happened to Savage and Amund. And I was ashamed.

"I'm sorry," I said and sat up abruptly, scrambling from the bed and dashing to the bathroom, slamming the door loudly. I knew he would be totally thrown and anxious but I overwhelmingly felt like I had let him down. I turned the taps on full and splashed water at my face, my hands shaking and breaths inexplicably fast as I tried to regain my calm. Damn it! I could watch open heart surgery without panicking, I had intubated dying men and pressed my hands into bleeding wounds but I was scared to discuss what happened with my boyfriend, the guy I really loved. I splashed more water and stared at the reflection, the haunted blue eyes and dishevelled face staring back as I heard a gentle tap on the door.

"Astrid?" Hiccup's soft voice was concerned.

"Go away!" I shouted.

"Astrid- what's wrong?" he asked me, his tone confused.

"I'm sorry," I shouted again.

"Astrid?" he asked me. "Let me in! I don't know what I've done but I'm sure I can make it up...I-I'm sorry I let you down and left you to sort everything out. I-I guess I'm just Useless and unfit to lead but I could only do what I thought was right because all I am is a stupid High School kid, not a
soldier or a doctor or anything amazing like you and I…"

"It's not you, it's me!" I shouted. "I've let you down!"

He went silent.

"I didn't do what you wanted," I said and found my throat thick. "I let you down."

"Astrid? What happened?" he asked through the door. His voice was very worried now.

"I'm not you!" I shouted and there were tears on my face now. He tried the door but it was locked. There was a pause and then a thud as something hit the door. I heard him grunt in pain. The door held. He hit the door three times more but it was a good quality door and it held against his amateur attempts to break through. With a sigh, I walked up and flipped the lock and then went to sit down on the floor by the shower cubicle.

"It's open," I shouted and he warily pushed it open, rubbing his shoulder. His shoulder was bruised badly and he looked flustered. But his eyes were concerned. He had put his prosthesis on but otherwise he was still only in his underwear as he warily moved in and knelt by me.

"Don't push me away," he begged me softly as he took my hand. "Please, Astrid-I can't lose you." I felt tears burn my eyes and I blinked hard.

"You won't want me," I told him despondently. I just felt so horrible and I knew he would be so disappointed.

"Tell me," he suggested. "Look, Astrid-you said you wanted me despite my complete Uselessness. Unless you've been banging Snotlout." He paled. "Please tell me you haven't..." I glanced up and pulled a face.

"Yuk. No way. But I didn't do what you wanted, Hiccup. I was so mad and so scared." My voice was breaking and I hated it. His eyes looked serious and he slowly eased himself beside me, a lanky arm wrapping around my shoulders.

"Tell me, Astrid," he said seriously. "I won't judge you. I promise"

So I told him and felt his arm tighten as I described what went down. His breathing accelerated as I told him what I said, what we did and how it ended.

And then there was silence.

His arms tightened around me and I found myself wrapped in his embrace, his warmth comforting. I buried my face in his chest and felt myself shaking. Then he sighed.

"They broke into a dragon pen and planned to suffocate us all after stealing the dragons," he said slowly. "You offered them a chance to surrender and they chose a Changewing over you." He paused. "I wouldn't have done it like that...but I wasn't there. You're a soldier. You did what you had to do. And I trusted you to make it back with my best friend, to save Toothless and my Dad and BERK. And you did all those things, Astrid. You did them because I couldn't. Because I was a prisoner, sold by Drago to Alvin so Dagur could torture and-and rape me." His breathing had grown ragged. I could feel him shaking at the thought.

"I-I did it because they had you," I admitted thickly. "I knew you would be hurt and it hurt me so much to imagine you in pain when you didn't deserve any of it. When you had given yourself up for me. And they had tried to kill me...and the General. They had planned to steal Toothless and
Stormfly. They had tortured you horribly and killed Ozzie. And I didn't want them just to sit in a Pen, probably finding some damned way out and coming for us. So I…made sure it couldn't happen. I had the dragons at my back and when they were told a dragon was in there, I offered them the chance to surrender. Instead, Savage tried to tame Skyshimmer—and he was literally melted." I paused. "It…it was horrible. We made the offer again but only two men ran for the door. The rest…stayed."

His lips pressed gently onto my tear-soaked face his fingers pulling my hair from the braid and stroking it loose over my shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't want it to be about revenge and I gave them the chance to surrender but in the end…"

"They did what Dogsbreath did," Hiccup reminded me hollowly. "You gave them a chance, Astrid. They chose not to take it." He swallowed. "Remember-when I saw Dagur trying to stab you, I shot him. I killed him." He closed his eyes, his breathing heavy. "Gods, I feel so…"

"Guilty," I finished for him and he stared lovingly into my eyes, his forest green gaze filled with gratitude and understanding. He pressed his hands to cup my cheeks, a thumb gently sliding over my lower lip.

"When I saw him threaten you, my love, I wanted to kill him," he confessed in an ashamed voice. "He had taken so much from me…my self-respect, my confidence, my sense of safety, my leg…I wasn't letting him take you as well!" He leaned forward, his nose touching mine. "I would die for you. And I killed for you. I'm sorry…"

I leaned forward. "I'm not," I murmured. "I hope you can forgive me…" His eyes widened for a second then he leaned closer, his lips pressing into mine.

"Always," he murmured.

oOo

We finally got up after a long period just embracing and kissing and separated to shower and dress. Suited and booted, we got breakfast and spent a little time together before heading for our own duties. Hiccup was back in his second best rust red shirt, waistcoat and skinny black jeans while I was in uniform, my hair braided immaculately and a small smirk on my lips as I walked alongside my amazing boyfriend. Reluctantly, I headed back for the infirmary to check the patients and Hiccup reported to Gobber to check the base and speak with the other riders. I was busy all morning but noted when Hiccup came in to see his father and I smiled as he was crushed in a huge bear hug as the General showed his relief at Hiccup's safe return. I didn't hear what they said though I could see that his brush with his own mortality—coupled with the revelations about how dismally his own son had been treated by just about everyone, including his treacherous brother—had made him appreciate his son far more than he had. Hiccup was brilliant, kind, patient, inventive, brave, selfless and dorky. He wasn't brash, arrogant or muscle-bound…not the son the General expected or probably thought he wanted. But Stoick had finally begun to appreciate the son he had and he was grateful and proud that he had returned.

The time passed swiftly because we were busy: the infirmary was packed and I was getting all sorts of competences signed off towards Foundation and Ortho programmes. Hiccup was managing the Base, leading the Riders and taking training—for which I joined them. But in the evenings—or sometimes the early mornings—we had our own flight practice, just Hiccup and I on our dragons, flying high and fast and carefree way above the clouds. And up there, he finally showed me the daredevil he had mentioned, diving from the saddle with Toothless diving down after him, gently
rolling around one another and rejoining each other only a hundred feet or so above the ground. The first time I saw it, my heart was in my throat and each time after, I was still tense until they were safely back together.

We still slept together, in either his room or mine and he was always very gentle and tender whenever we shared a bed. He never made a move on me but he was gaining in confidence, his kisses more sensual and his hands bolder as we made out. There was something so appealing about his vulnerability, his consideration and his aching need for me. And to be honest, the high point of my day was any time spent with him. I really thought things were going to settle down for a while so I could learn how to be. Dragon Rider and doctor without some disaster happening...

It was almost two weeks after Alvin was defeated and the infirmary was finally slowing down. Stoick was back in his quarters, though a horrible convalescent. He insisted his son come to see him every day and discuss the running of the base with him. And every day Hiccup refused to go into any details, though he had asked his father's help in dealing with Alvin's fate. A press release from the security services had announced that famed Industrialist, Alvin Tindall had perished in an accident at his testing facility in Scotland, shortly after going bankrupt. The item had lasted two days on the news and then vanished as more exciting items came up. Alvin had been cremated and his ashes sprinkled on the estate where he died. But Hiccup looked more and more harried after every visit to his increasingly difficult father.

I had finished my shift and had time for a visit to Stormfly in her pen with Toothless when he intercepted me and hauled me along to the residential corridor. He was looking anxious as he led me to an unfamiliar door at the end. Then he took my hands.

"I have a surprise for you," he said nervously. "Um...please promise not to punch me, okay?" I frowned slightly but nodded. I trusted him even though he looked very fidgety.

"I promise," I sighed. He gently put his hand over my eyes and opened the door, carefully guiding me in and closing the door behind him.

"You can open your eyes now," he said quietly.

I looked-and then gaped. Before me was a large room with two standard chests of drawers and desks along one wall, two wardrobes behind the door and a double bed against the far wall. I blinked: the bed had standard white sheets with a deep azure and gold quilt, small white lights on the simple shelves by the bed and a small sofa and coffee table in the centre of the room and a door to the right leading to the en suite. I saw my picture of my parents and my Gran on one desk with what looked like a degree above it. I walked forward and stared at the parchment marked with the coat of arms of my University:

_Astrid Helena Hofferson is hereby awarded with Honours the Degrees of Batchelor of Medicine and Batchelor of Surgery..._

I stared and then glanced at the rest of the room: the other desk had Hiccup's computers and cables dumped on it with the framed picture of him with his Mother. Above the desk was his High School Diploma and a framed picture of me done in charcoals. I stared at him and he swallowed nervously.

"I knew you'd hate it," he said quietly and then I realised: he had planned this with the others. "I-I got Cami and Ruff to do the colours...I told them what colours you did in your apartment..." He backed up a step. "Um...Eret, Fish and Tuff moved everything. I...er...contacted your University and they issued your degree because I...er...kinda said we needed you operational..."

I walked towards him and he backed up until his back hit the door.
"Oh Thor," he murmured. "Um...you did promise not to hit me..."

"I did, didn't I?"

"Um...yes?"

"You got my degree certificate?"

"I-I thought you deserved it..."

"And you let Tuff help move my things?"

"I'm gonna die, aren't I?" he whimpered. I grabbed his shirt and he flinched-and then I pulled him towards me-then pressed a fierce kiss on his lips. His eyes snapped open and his hands slid around my waist, pulling me closer. Once he had his confidence, he actually was a fantastic kisser and I melted into his embrace. Finally, he broke away, his eyes softly glowing with relief.

"Am I reprieved?" he asked softly. I looked up into his still-anxious face and smiled.

"For being considerate, thoughtful, adorable, dorky and taking charge of the whole moving in together thing...let me think... I'll need another one of those to make my mind up, Dragon Boy..."

"As Milady commands," he smirked and leaned forward. But we had barely made contact when both our wrist coms alarmed and he froze, then sighed and leaned his forehead against mine. "If that is the twins, they're on dung duty for a year!" he growled softly. Then the coms made a peculiar sound and he started. He stared at his in shock.

"What is it, babe?" I asked.

"The Hatching Alarm!" Hiccup murmured.

We sprinted down to the lowest level, below the level of the Pens, and Hiccup let us in using his palm and iris biometric recognition. Fishlegs, Gobber and Snotlout were already there, as were the Base Veterinarians, Dr Tyler and Dr Hanssen. I glanced around.

"Where's Eret?" I asked. Gobber sighed.

"Wi' Heather," he said heavily. She was no better, screaming in fury and grief at the loss of her brothers and swearing bloody and agonising vengeance against Hiccup for killing Dagur. Eret hadn't been able to get through to her and I felt very sorry for him. We had contacted a Neuroradiologist and several Psychologists and Psychiatrists to see what they could do but so far, we had few leads.

Hiccup leaned close to the Vets.

"What's happening?" he asked and Hanssen-a burly middle-aged woman with fading blonde hair, smiled.

"That little clump of four identical eggs to the right are starting to move," she reported. "Infra-red showing exponential temperature rise and fissuring to the shell. They're definitely going to explode!"

"Hell, yeah!" he told me with glee. "Dragons don't arrive like chickens. Even being born, they're pretty awesome!" I stared at him and sighed.

"Is that pen blast-shielded?" I asked. Hiccup gave me a small grin, his eyes playful.

"It is now..." he admitted. "The first hatching took us all by surprise...especially when a small Gronckle was blasted straight through the wall and into the arms of the security guard on duty." I looked up and met Fishleg's smiling blue-green eyes.

"You? You were the first?" I asked him. He nodded happily.

"Meatlug was just so cute when I first got her," he said, "and I just bonded with her instantly. And that was what got me so interested in the whole field of Dragon Mythology and Lore..." His face lit with enthusiasm and I found myself grinning at his excitement. "Oooh...I wonder what kind of dragon they will be?"

"They're not very big so they'll probably just be Terrors..." Snotlout scoffed and leaned against the wall. Hiccup frowned. The eggs that were rapidly approaching a thousand degrees in temperature were different in size and colour to Terrible Terror eggs. He leaned over the monitor, then pulled out his tablet and accessed the Bork Journals before he began flicking through the index for eggs. I stared at him as red and white glowing cracks appears in the mottled white and black shells. Instinctively I ducked back and half-hid behind Hiccup. He looked up, almost amused...and then four loud explosions shook the chamber and the viewing booth. Something slammed into the reinforced window, cracking it and we all threw ourselves to the floor.

"What the Helheim was that?" Gobber asked from behind the console. Dr Tyler peered over the chair he was cowering behind and frowned. He was herpetologist, a reptile expert and was literally having the time of his life in BERK. But as we all cautiously looked, there was a small dragon-about the length of a forearm-clamped onto the window, his tail flicking. His face was long and sharp with a nose horn and small, focussed eyes. He was bright white while the other three-identical in shape-were black. Hiccup crawled off me where he had thrown himself and peered at the dragons. The white dragon was chirping and the other three black dragons seemed to be listening.

"They're communicating!" he realised.

"Like the dolphins," I murmured. He glanced at me and nodded.

"They certainly aren't Terrible Terrors!" Fishlegs put in. "I wonder if there is anything in the Archives about them?" Hiccup paused, then his fingers danced over the screen and he pulled up a badly eroded and faded text: Chronicles of Dragon's Edge. Fishlegs squeaked in shock. "Where did you find those?" he asked, fascinated.

"Icelandic National Archives," Hiccup admitted. "But the scans are really poor. One day, I need to go and examine the original..." He flashed across pages, his forest green eyes focussed at the images zooming by. And then he stopped and I peered over his shoulder. It was all in old Norse...but the image was definitely the dragons we were seeing.

"What is it, laddie?" Gobber asked. I stared.

"Night Terrors," he murmured. "They are called Night Terrors. There is one leader and a huge swarm. They form huge clouds that create three dimensional shapes designed to frighten away predators."
"Um…there are only four of them!" Snotlout pointed out. "They wouldn't even frighten away Fishface!"

"Hey!" the larger young man protested. "It'd take eight at least!"

"…and everyone's a joker," Hiccup sighed, looking at the dragons. They were chittering agitatedly. Hiccup frowned and watched as they formed up a diamond and began to fly against the wall, squawking in distress.

"What's up?" I asked. He frowned.

"They seem desperate to get out…" he murmured.

"But there are no predators here," Fishlegs noted.

"They live in huge herds," Hiccup read and glanced up. They were crying out in distress. It was heart-wrenching to hear.

"They want the rest of their herd," I guessed. Hiccup stared at me in perplexity.

"But there aren't any," he murmured. "They went a thousand years ago…"

"Did they die…or hide?" I asked. He stared at me. "How long do they live?" I asked him. He paused and his glorious eyes widened.

"I-I don't know…" he murmured. "I mean…they left eggs…"

"And are these all the eggs?" I asked, gesturing at the remaining, quiescent eggs in the Pit. He shook his head.

"The records suggested more nests," he admitted. "Though they were vague about locations. Maps are incomplete or lost, names of places change, national boundaries aren't what they were then…"

"Some up in the Arctic Circle, north of Norway…" Gobber added. It was where they found this nest, I remembered. I inclined my head and tried to recall my geography.

"Or north of Russia?" I suggested. Hiccup stared at me. "Drago had the Russian Finance Minister, Grigori Ulmarsov, in his pocket…and there were three dragons in Birmingham that didn't belong to Alvin…that Zippleback, the Nadder and that Armoured Dragon…"

"Armorwing!" Fishlegs supplied helpfully. Hiccup threw his head back, groaning and pressing his hands to his head in frustration.

"What a fool!" he gasped. "He's already found a nest!" He stared back at the distressed dragons. "He has some of the other Night Terrors…and they know it…"

"But we have the leader…" I noted then looked at them carefully. They looked fierce but they acted nervous in such a small group. "Can they be tagged?" Hiccup stared at me in surprise and I blinked. "Oh. OH! Sorry…" He caught my hand and squeezed.

"The trick will be tagging them…" he murmured with a small smile. "I mean, I wasn't much of a challenge…" I batted his hand away and punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Ow…" he whined. I grinned back and he clutched his shoulder. "Oh, the pain…" he groaned dramatically.

"Ha!" Snotlout scoffed. "Wimp! Can't handle a punch from a girl…no offence intended, Princess…" I glared at him as Hiccup started laughing.
"Um-Snotlout…have you forgotten she's punched you out twice?" he smirked. The stocky sergeant blinked then scowled.

"No," he growled. I smiled sweetly and slid my arm through my boyfriend's, pointedly snuggling up to him.

"So what do we do, boss?" I asked him. He paused and sighed.

"We really don't have a choice," he realised. "Let them into Pen Four for the moment, Fishlegs—we don't want them to harm themselves trying to get out of here. Doctors—we need to prep for tagging them-double tags please, we don't want to lose them." He stared at me. "We'll need to follow them when we release them, Astrid. We need to find that nest…and those other dragons…" He paused. "And stop whatever Drago is planning with them!"
Forty-Four: A not-so flawless plan

It took a lot longer than anticipated to tag the Night Terrors, mainly because they were panicking pathetically. In the end, we got Toothless to calm them as their Alpha and once he had roared, they were much more compliant. But they were still a devil to tag until Tuffnut, of all people, stepped in. He bonded with the white leader—which he named Smidvarg—and the others just followed. Finally, they were ready to go.

Hiccup reported everything to his father and the General immediately wanted to take charge, despite his medically-enforced recuperation, and vetoed the scheme to release and track them. Hiccup stood his ground, arguing that his plan was most rational. Words were said and Hiccup went out flying without a word. I sighed, checked where he was using his tracker and then went to the Mess to spend time with the others while he cooled down.

By bedtime he hadn't come back and I commed him—to get no reply. I began to get annoyed and a little worried so I dragged my pyjamas on and trudged down to the security station and demanded the duty officer located me Hiccup and Toothless. Finally, I peered at the data and scowled. Toothless was located about ten yards from Hiccup—and Hiccup was in a pub about fifty miles from the base. And he had been there for hours.

Livid, I went back to the room. I was tired and seriously annoyed. He had promised to talk to me, to share any worries, not bottle them up. Instead, he had run away completely, leaving me to worry. And while I knew he really had no one to support him for so many years, he was in a relationship now. I was here for him and I resented being just…abandoned. And while I was aware that part of that was really selfish, I had needed to cover all the base commander stuff he had just walked out on. I sighed, closed the door and got ready for bed. It would feel weird going to bed without Hiccup, strange being alone in the cold bed without his warm, comforting presence. I huffed, grabbed my e-reader and began to scan my long-abandoned novel. But I couldn't concentrate, worrying if he was okay because he had been very upset to run. His default was still running—the legacy of years of isolation, bullying and psychological and physical abuse and while I hoped he had begun to trust me it seemed…he hadn't. And finally I put it down and irritably clicked the light off, huffing and angry. Predictably, I ended up lying awake and planning painful revenge on Hiccup…until I heard noises at the door. I closed my eyes, lay still and waited.

It took him about six attempts to get the key in the door and when the door opened, I saw him out of the corner of my eyes, bent forward with the key still in his hand. "Shhh…" he said to himself and stumbled in.

Yep. He was drunk.

He tried to quietly close the door, plunging the room into pitch blackness. I could hear him slowly limping towards the bed, the rustling of his coat sounding as he dropped it on the chair. He was muttering to himself as he removed his waistcoat and shirt and then he paused by the bed. "Try not to wake Astrid," he reminded himself carefully, falling over with a loud thud. He scrambled up. "Stupid leg," he muttered and tried again, wrestling with his skinny jeans. Actually, I knew he always found them awkward even when he was sober: now, he didn't stand a chance and I heard him fall and slam into the floor again.

"Ow," he whined. "I have too many legs…" Then he wrestled with his prosthesis and managed to get it unstrapped before he finally shimmied out of his jeans. Finally, he crawled to the bed and
managed to crawl in. He was totally uncoordinated and he accidentally caught me across the face as he tried to turn over.

"OW!" I snapped and turned angrily away from him. He moved and I could hear him fidgeting.

"'strid…sorry…I was trying to be quiet…" he slurred.

"You failed," I snapped.

"Least I tried," he protested.

"Shut up! Do you know what time it is?" I asked. He immediately went for his com and peered drunkenly at it.

"One forty-nine in the morning," he said proudly.

"Shut up. I need to sleep!" I was getting even more annoyed now but tried to remind myself that shouting at him drunk wouldn't really achieve anything.

"Someone's snarky!" he shot back.

"Someone has spent hours wondering where you were. Someone commed you four times with no reply. Someone had to do your work because you bunked off. And someone doesn't need some pathetic drunk keeping her awake!" I snapped. "Get out! You can sleep on the sofa! I do NOT need this shit at two o'clock in the morning."

"One fifty-one," he corrected me smugly. I leaned over and literally shoved him off the bed. Unprepared, uncoordinated, he slid from the bed and hit the floor with a loud thud then gave a pathetic whine of pain.

"Couch. NOW!" I shouted and I could imagine him making a hurt face but I was far too mad at him to worry about that. But I felt a twinge of guilt when he didn't fight and just submissively crawled to the couch, knowing his utter lack of self confidence. I heard him try to make himself comfortable and give a slight groan. I adjusted the bedclothes and turned away from him again.

"Astrid?" he called shakily.

"Shut up."

"Don't you wanna know why I went out to the pub?"

"No. I am so mad at you, Hiccup. I cannot tell you how mad."

"Why are you mad? I'm the one my father told he wished had never been born!" he protested.

"I'm mad because it's two o'clock in the morning and I haven't heard from you. I was worried and I thought we'd agreed if you had any problems we would talk them out, not do any of this…shit!" I snapped.

"So you're mad because of you," he said with slurred drunken insight. "Not because I might be so upset about something that I reacted on instinct because I've had no one to talk to for-for years."

"You've got someone now but you're doing a fine job of pissing her off when she wants to get to sleep!" I snarled. "Hiccup, will you fucking shut up? Or I swear I will get out of this bed and punch you!"
"Too late," he told me smugly. "Already happened."

There was a pause and I stared into the dark before feeling the sense of foreboding I had been trying to ignore crash over me. I had worried something would happen to him—part of the reason I was so mad.

"What?" I asked, sitting up. I reached for the light and clicked it on, blinking against the illumination. He was lying on his side on the couch, looking at me and clad in his boxers and T-shirt, his dark auburn hair totally dishevelled and green eyes glazed with alcohol. His lip was split, there were bruises on his cheeks and chin and a nasty cut over his left eye. "Hiccup…what the hell happened?" My anger was all gone, replaced by concern. He grinned wildly at me.

"Got into a little fight!" he said proudly, waving his hands towards me. I could see skinned and split knuckles and frowned.

"Hiccup?" I asked worrily. He wasn't a fighter, wasn't someone who sought conflict. He had been so abused I was actually worried to even feign hitting him because he responded instinctively and curled up like a beaten child. My guilt kicked me even harder for my earlier angry words. "What happened?" He lifted his head and gave me a small smile.

"My Dad was mad at me and he said a lot of things I probably deserved," he admitted. "But—but that didn't stop them hurting, Astrid. They…really hurt…so I got bit upset and went flying on Toothless for ages. Then I really needed a drink so I went to a pub but they thought I was someone to make fun of because I'm skinny and American and shy and so they had a go at me and in the end it all got a bit physical. And once they had really kicked the crap out of me, I got up and staggered back to Toothless and came home…" My eyes softened in sorrow.

"Hiccup…" I murmured. He gave me a small smile, unconsciously brave but filled with the melancholy that came from still having no self-worth.

"Don't worry. I won't bother you at the infirmary. I'll be fine…" he said as I got up and walked to his side.

"Why didn't you come and talk to me?" I asked him softly, my fingers gently combing through his wild hair.

"You wouldn't have hit me," he murmured ashamedly, his voice trusting. "I deserve it for being so hopeless. I mean, my father doesn't deserve a son like me." That brought tears to my eyes.

"Hiccup—he doesn't but not for the reasons you're thinking," I sighed. "You're amazing and I love you. Come to bed."

"But you just kicked me out!" he protested. I glared at him and grabbed his arm.

"Hiccup—get in the damned bed!" I growled. He sighed, got awkwardly to his foot, hopped towards the bed, tripped over his discarded jeans and prosthesis and hit the floor with a crash.

"Oww…" he whined, holding his head where he had collided with the bed. I grabbed him and hauled him onto the bed, tucked him in, then clambered in beside him. I wrapped my arms around him and felt him urgently pull against me, his lanky arms wrapping around me and head nuzzling into my chest. "I'm sorry I'm so useless," he sighed, his voice ashamed. I kissed his hair, feeling ashamed of my irritation when he had been out, engaging in such horrible self-destructive behaviour. Been out forgetting he had someone who loved him and instead seeking only physical pain as a way of addressing his emotional and mental pain. Tears burned my eyes.
"I love you, Hiccup," I said in a choked voice. "Don't leave me like that again."

"I'm sorry," he whimpered miserably. "I-I do love you but I didn't think you deserved such a hopeless boyfriend." I hugged him even harder, curling around him.

"You doofus!" I sighed. "You're not hopeless, you're the best man in this base and I love you to pieces. Now stop listening to that idiot the General and listen to me. I love you."

"mmm...'strid..." he murmured, his breathing deepening. I felt him relax in sleep hugging me desperately but sleep eluded me again. And while I was no longer angry at Hiccup, I was furious at the General because he had forgotten how damaged his son was and had inflicted some serious harm on him. And I swore that I would not let him believe that he was useless-ever.

I was exhausted when I woke but dragged myself up, showered, dressed and then tried to wake Hiccup. He was lying on his front, his head bent uncomfortably to one side, snoring loudly. I shook him, called to him and eventually had to pour a glass of water onto him to get him to move. And then he whimpered and tried to shield his eyes.

**Hung over,** I sighed. Determined to get him up, I hauled him from the bed and more or less manhandled him into the shower, mercilessly flipping the water on. Unfortunately for Hiccup, it was freezing cold and he gave an alarmed scream as it hit him, his eyes snapping open and hands frantically scrubbling for the temperature control knob.

"Why...why did you do that?" he protested pitifully. I bustled out and grabbed him some fresh clothes to place on the folded towel.

"Because we need to be up, Babe, and you were dead to the world!" I told him. He got a mouthful of water and spluttered.

"I feel half dead..." he coughed, achingly stripping his clothes off and scrubbing away automatically. I sighed.

"Dragon Boy, you've got a hangover," I said mildly, trying to be sympathetic. I was leaning at the door, staring into the bedroom: he'd managed to make it look as if a bomb had gone off.

"No kidding," he grumbled, washing his hair. "I really am very sorry, Astrid. I-I shouldn't have run..." He flipped the water off and I handed him a towel. "Thanks. I really don't deserve you..." I smiled softly.

"Despite your drunken antics...Babe...you are the only one here who does," I told him with a sigh. "But we do need to talk, Hiccup. I need to know what happened and what I can do..." He lowered the towel and sighed.

"I-I don't want to talk about it," he said quietly, "but I will, with you because you're right: running away isn't healthy. It doesn't make anything better: it just lets the problem linger on and fester."

"And as your personal doctor, festering really isn't good," I smiled as he hopped towards me, the towel wrapped around his middle. I handed him his prosthesis and he leaned forward, expertly strapping it to his stump, wincing at the pressure on the sensitive scars and then he limped to the bed, sitting on the edge and sighing as he reached for his underwear.

"He's impossible," he said tightly as I settled on the couch, staring up into his tight, bruised face, noting more welts and wounds on his scarred body. I was getting better at reading his expressions
and I knew he had been frustrated and deeply wounded by what the General had said. "He's not even supposed to be operational yet and he badgers and pesters me until I tell him something…and then, without all the information, he utterly rubbishes my plan and tells me I am endangering the entire mission-like that ship hasn't sailed…" His hands were waving around, his face animated as he poured his woes out and I felt my lips curve into an unconscious smile at his sudden transformation from mute to garrulous…but only for me. God, there was an amazing, brave, smart, caring man under the vulnerable exterior and every time he showed me another piece of himself, I loved him more, even when he was suffering. And I was determined to help ease that pain. "And he said I was stupid and had no training…true, of course because I was dragged here like a piece of luggage without ever bothering if I wanted to be locked inside a mountain in Scotland for…EVER…"

"Babe…that's his problem, not yours," I pointed out gently but he had really got going now.

"Yeah…but he makes it my problem!" he told me, the edge on his voice hinting at his pain. "And then he told me that I had got lucky and my inexperience had endangered the dragons and you and the entire base…and I pointed out that he was the one who treated Dagur almost as a son and trusted Spitelout with his life and never listened to any of the warnings or concerns I had…and then he told me that he was a General and an expert and why should he listen to the word of some skinny, disobedient kid who almost wrecked the project…" I got up and walked over, sitting at his side and taking his hand because his hands had stopped moving and his voice had dropped, sensing he was close to the deepest wound. "And he basically blamed me for Mom dying and said if I hadn't been born, she would still be alive because I wouldn't have distracted her and she wouldn't have crashed…and I told him…I told him that Drago caused the crash to kill us both but he didn't listen and he shouted that he wished I hadn't been born and that they had been happy without me…"

He stopped, his head bowing forward and breathing growing heavy and irregular. I wrapped my arms around him and felt his face burrow into my shoulder, my hand rising to stroke his head. I twisted to wrap my arms around him and felt him almost crush me in his arms: he was desperate and wounded and just needed someone to tell him he was loved and wanted without reservation…and I was that person. I just needed the General to stop undoing everything I was trying to do in building his son back up.

"You do know he's an asshole, don't you?" I told him. He nodded mutely.

"He'll put me in the brig for that, for sure!" he sighed.

"Well, General Asshole needs to obey orders himself before he expects anyone else to!" I grumbled.

"I think he prefers General Stoick 'the Vast' Haddock," Hiccup reminded me, wincing. His head was aching. I reached over and got him some aspirin.

"Asshole," I insisted.

"But would that go before or after 'the Vast'?" he asked me. I stared at him and my lips quirked.

"Obviously after," I told him trying not to laugh. "As in…Stoick the Vast asshole Haddock!" I saw his shoulders begin to jerk and he chuckled, his eyes gleaming with mirth.

"You are gonna get me in so much trouble," he laughed. "I'm gonna be thinking 'vast asshole' when I see him next. And he's my Dad as well! Oh Thor…" He hugged me gently again. "Thank you," he murmured. "Now let's get breakfast…"
We walked down to the mess hand in hand—not strict military protocol but definitely something he needed and he chivalrously held the door open for me. He knew the drill—walk in, head held high, act as if nothing was out of the ordinary and don't draw any attention to his wounds. Of course, with the twins on the table, the chances of the Riders acting with any sort of discretion were less than nil.

"Dude! Has Lieutenant Astrid been beating you up?" Tuff asked cheerfully, peering carefully at Hiccup's welts as he sat down with his plate of bacon, eggs, tomatoes, beans and toast. I slammed my porridge down irritably.

"Tuff, do you want to find out?" I asked him directly. The twins both pulled faces.

"Oooh! Someone's snarky!" Ruff teased me and I scowled at her.

"Not funny," I said in a warning voice, glancing over at Hiccup. I could see his cheeks flushed with embarrassment and I hated that their teasing may make him feel worse…but he lifted his chin calmly and took a sip of his coffee.

"Ruff, if Astrid had beaten me up, I would be in the infirmary, probably in a coma," he said calmly and I stared at him, realising that he was teasing me. "This was just some drunks in a pub." Tuff fist-bumped his twin.

"Sweet, dude!" they said. "Was it awesome?"

"I was wasted so no idea," Hiccup admitted calmly. Snotlout stared at him in shock.

"You went AWOL and then went to the pub?" he repeated in shock.

"Didn't know you had it in you!" Cami commented.

"Cuz-why?" Snotlout persisted: Hiccup chewed his toast and sighed.

"General and I had a discussion," he admitted as I fired warning glares at the rest of the team. Thankfully, they all got the hint and subsided…until Tuff piped up.

"At least I've got the plan underway," he said with satisfaction. I watched Hiccup stiffen.

"What plan?" he asked, his green gaze finding mine.

"Releasing Smidvarg and the Gang!" he said blithely and I saw Hiccup pale.

"Er, Tuff—the agreement was that they were released when we were ready to track and follow them," he said tightly but the male twin was completely oblivious.

"But they're tracked anyway, right, dude?" he asked.

"Oh, Gods…"

"And they're nocturnal so why release them during the day?" Ruff added.

"Because it's much harder to track them visually at night!" Hiccup snapped.

"Or see another group of riders come up and grab them?" I added, watching Hiccup glaring at the twins.

"And when did you decide to completely disobey orders?" he asked sharply. There was an outburst
of laughing.

"Says the man who went AWOL and vanished down the pub!" Eret scoffed.

"Yeah-you took off and left Astrid to look after everything!" Ruff snapped.

"And you were incommunicado!" Fishlegs reminded him firmly. "No one could get an answer-and I know the Lieutenant went down to the coms station at midnight still trying to find you!" Hiccup abruptly jerked to his feet, glaring at the whole team.

"This is not up for debate!" he growled. "When did you release the damned Night Terrors, Tuff? Does anyone here even care they have gone and may already be in Drago's hands? Or that you have single-handedly screwed up a plan that I had to go through Hel to get by the General?" He grabbed the remains of his toast and stormed out, shaking his head.

"Way to go, team!" I snapped as the door slammed after him. "The General really hated the plan and wanted it buried. Hiccup felt it was the best option-which it is-and only managed to sell it because he is still de facto Base Commander until the General gets back on duty and knows more about dragons that the General ever could. But Stoick gave Hiccup absolute dog's abuse in the discussion. I'd want a drink after that. And then you decide to screw it up!"

"Hey…we were only trying to help…" Tuff protested.

"THIS IS A FUCKING MILITARY OPERATION!" I screamed at them, lurching to my feet. "You don't 'try to help' in contravention of direct orders. And you all have standing orders NOT to allow any dragon out without express clearance from a senior officer-is that correct?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" came the mumbled replies from all present. I glared at them.

"Dragons!" I growled. "At Pen One in ten, suited and booted. Snot, Fish-get those trackers locked and find out where they are. And you better pray we can find those dragons-otherwise I will instruct Stormfly and Toothless to EAT the lot of you!" And then I grabbed my coffee and stalked off in search of my boyfriend. The door slammed behind me as I headed back to the room: I could guess what he was doing. By the time I arrived, he had already managed to get into his flight suit and was zipping it up.

"Don't say it," he said tightly. Rolling my eyes, I stuffed my coffee into his hand and jerked my head.

"Drink!" I snapped, hastily grabbing my own flight suit and throwing my uniform off. He sipped the coffee and grimaced as I dragged the form-fitting suit on and strapped my weapon onto my hip. "You are not going anywhere without me, Hiccup!" He was breathing hard.

"You know how difficult my Dad was about this plan-and for Tuff to just release them…" His voice was angry and I nodded, retrieving the remains of my coffee and finishing them. "Snotlout? Any news?" I murmured down my com.

"Fishlegs has been checking," he reported. "They were hanging around the glen until just before dawn-and since then they've been flying steadily north."

"They've crossed the northern coast and are heading for the Shetland Isles," Fishlegs added. "Trackers are functioning well. I'll patch tracking data to your coms."

"Thanks," I said and turned to Hiccup. I could tell he was still steaming, his emerald eyes glittering and bruised face set. "You have every right to be mad," I assured him. He nodded curtly.
"We'll head after them—because they have a huge lead," he decided, heading for the door. "The others can follow—because we may need them if Drago has more than the three we saw…" I locked the door.

"I think you can bet on that," I sighed as we headed wordlessly down the stairs. He was mute, brooding and looked pale under his bruises: he was still hung over but I knew he just wanted to get after those dragons. Drago scared him, maybe even worse than Dagur—because Hiccup had no idea what Drago was capable of or what his intentions were. Though I had an inkling because Drago had kidnapped us, tortured us…and planned to murder Hiccup. And by all accounts, he was the man responsible for Hiccup's mother's death. I lengthened my stride and ended up jogging to keep up with his brisk and long stride: even with a prosthetic, he was fast when he wanted to be.

We arrived at Pen One quicker than expected and he paused for a long second before slapping his palm onto the reader and walking in. The others were already there: they must have changed in record time and sprinted to get to the Pen. I have to confess, I was mildly impressed: Hiccup had managed to put the fear of God into them. Wordlessly, Hiccup whistled Toothless and began to saddle him: he had almost blanked the team and they watched him, unsure what to say. There was a long very uncomfortable space where the Riders shuffled their feet, stared at each other and exchanged a lot of glances daring each other to be the first to speak. In the end, Eret bit the bullet.

"Riders assembled and ready, sir!" he reported, standing to attention. Checking the tail assembly, Hiccup reluctantly raised his green gaze and gave a single nod.

"Mount up," he said firmly. "Our heading is 033 degrees. The Night Terrors are currently passing Esha Ness in the Shetland Islands and showing no signs of slowing."

"They have maintained that heading since they left the glen," Fishlegs reported.

"Ultimate destination?" I asked.

"I got that!" a voice volunteered over the com: it was Will. "Projections take the Terrors all the way up to Kvitoya."

"Where the cache of eggs was originally found," Hiccup realised.

"And projecting beyond…to Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa," Will concluded.

"What?" Gustav asked.

"Ooh—I know this. He plays for Barcelona, doesn't he?" Mulch offered.

"I thought he played ice hockey…" Ruff suggested.

"No," I sighed. "Your ice hockey player is a place. 'He' is Franz-Josef Land. A group of islands in the north of the Barents Sea, over 80 degrees north—and belonging to the Russian Federation." They stared at me. "Geography GCSE." Cami pulled a face and I shrugged.

"And none of this is getting us any closer to the Night Terrors," Hiccup sighed. "Astrid and I will go ahead—because we are far faster. Snotlout—lead the rest after us. We'll scout and I guess we'll need back-up if Drago actually is after them."

"Yeah—we don't want to be rescuing your skinny ass again!" Snotlout said but there was enough teasing in his voice that even though Hiccup stiffened, he forced himself to relax and shrug.

"Got no plans in that direction, to be honest," he admitted, standing up with a hiss and pulling his
helmet on. He mounted up and glanced across to me…and I nodded, hopping up onto Stormfly and leaning forward. "Ready, Mi…Lieutenant?" He managed to stop himself saying his pet name for me with an effort and I smiled quietly under my helmet.

"Yessir!" I shot back and I could feel his sharp glance, suspecting I was teasing him. The creak and groan of the external doors opening sounded as Toothless shot into the air. "C'mon, girl-let's go!" I urged her and we accelerated after him, straight into the air. The other took off but Toothless was already climbing fiercely and Stormfly was faithfully zooming after him. We flew for a few minutes before I gave up and flipped the com to a private channel.

"You gonna give me the silent treatment for the whole flight, Commander Dragon Boy?" I asked him directly, my voice sounding exasperated.

"Wha…?" He sounded surprised: he had been so lost in his thoughts that he had forgotten about me. "Oh…I mean…I…Astrid…" He sounded flustered which made me smirk: he had almost been pulling off the stern commander act and had certainly shocked the other Riders. "Sorry…look, I'm not used to flying any distance with anyone talking to me…um…the Riders never did…well, not to me…but about me…mostly all the way…"

"I guess they may be different now," I suggested but he paused for a long time.

"Maybe," he conceded. "Also…um…I do have a horrible hangover."

"Babe…that is something you're gonna have to deal with on your own…"

"Some doctor you are," he huffed gently. I smiled.

"I treat trauma not stupidity," I retorted and he chuckled over the com.

"The Terrors are flying in tight formation on a direct course," he said and I called up the schematic on the Head's-Up display of the helmet visor, seeing the little diamond of red dots speeding up past the Norwegian coast.

"We should intercept in about an hour," I read.

"I could get them faster," he offered.

"No way, Dragon Boy!" I warned him. "I am so not allowing you to run off and get captured again.

"Milady, I am not getting captured by Drago again," he promised and Toothless drifted closer so I could see his green eyes through the visor. "We'll follow the Terrors and see where they go."

We flew on, chatting quietly and occasionally checking in with the other Riders. Snotlout was grumpy because he was having to be Hiccup-and was realising how irritating the others tended to be and having to manage the twins, Gustav, Cami, Eret, Fishlegs, Bucket and Mulch as they argued, ignored orders and messed around was straining his patience beyond breaking point and Hiccup and I shared a glance as we heard him shout at the others to shut up.

The argument went on for about an hour as we slowly closed to almost within visual range of the Terrors, climbing above the wispy clouds to stare down on the dragons and magnify the image to see the four shapes—one pure white and three black-flying furiously, eyeballs out, on their way to their herd-mates.

"Do you think we should help Snot?" I asked Hiccup quietly and he paused, peering down at the little dragons.
"Is that a trick question?" he asked me pointedly. "How many times did he help me when that lot were making my life miserable? He's a proper officer, been in the army for years...I'm just a civilian who happens to have a knack with a Night Fury..."

"Babe-you are a brilliant dragon trainer-and riding instructor, if I do say so myself!-and you're right, he's an NCO," I told him warmly. "He should be able to shout at privates until the cows come home!"

"At least he was trained for that," Hiccup sighed.

"HICcup! WHERE THE HEl ARE YOU?"

"...and the hits just keep on coming," he groaned as the General's voice died away. "We're heading on heading 033 parallel to the coast of Norway, about level with Trondheim..."

"And why precisely are you heading there?" The General's voice was dangerously quiet.

"I thought you were still on sick leave!" Hiccup shot back, avoiding the question.

"I was cleared by Gothi first thing," he reported. "I am officially back in charge...so why the Hel are you and all the dragons out of the Base and heading north?"

"Exercise," Hiccup said quietly.

"Why are Security tracking the Night Terrors, Hiccup?" Stoick asked directly. I saw him stiffen and take a deep breath.

"Because our exercise is in tracking them down," he admitted. "They got out."

"WHAT?" Stoick bellowed. I was surprised we couldn't hear him without the com: I had to shake my head and dial down the volume. "Despite my EXPRESS orders not to proceed with this ridiculous and foolhardy plan, you had to disobey me and release them. I tell you now-if those dragons are not returned safe and sound, I will personally confine you to the brig for a month and ground you for three!"

His shoulders slumped and I knew then that Stoick, despite the signs that he was beginning to appreciate his son, was still treating him like an errant kid. "Hiccup..." I murmured quietly but he leaned forward and accelerated down to the little dragons, Toothless folding his wings and the whistling sound of the dragon's speed loud as he dived. I gritted my teeth and zoomed after him... but as I glanced, I could see a smattering of other red dots across the display and closing.

"HICcup!" I should over the com. "We're not alone! Get back here!"

"Report, Lieutenant!" the General shouted over the com.

"Bogeys moving in fast from nor'noreast!" I replied. "They're heading for the Terrors."

"How many?"

"Can none of you imbeciles read the telemetry? Kinda busy here at the moment!" I snapped. "Twelve moving in...but the Terrors are accelerating..."

"Lieutenant...got something unusual on the scope..." Will called.

"Define 'unusual!'" I snapped, bending lower over Stormfly. Hiccup was diving at full speed, shouting to the Terrors.
"Massive displacement of air currents…overlying massive water displacement," he reported.

"What?"

"It's a vessel!" Will realised as the sleek grey hull broke surface, still not registering on our sensors. That was some terrifyingly advanced tech down there…and I knew who owned it even as weapons raised and aimed at us. Nets swirled out, entrapping the Terrors, Toothless…and Stormfly. I screamed as we went down, staring despairingly across to the Night Fury as we both plunged, enmeshed and helpless, into the icy sea…
Day of the Hunter

Chapter Notes

Reminder. First person POV is Astrid only. Everything else is third person/omniscient narrator view (just mentioning this because the chapter has a lot more third person POV than most!)

Forty-Five: Day of the Hunter

I awoke with a groan, disorientated. Automatically, I felt for my weapon-and came up dry. Instantly, I sat up, reaching for my com: gone. I scanned the small metal room: featureless, blank...and devoid of Hiccup. I achingly scrambled to my feet and tried to remember how I got here...

...falling tangled in the metal and carbon fibre net, hitting the ice-cold water and sinking...glancing over to Toothless and seeing the dragon struggling as we were reeled under the water and into the sleek ship...being dragged from Stormfly...struggling against our captors...watching Hiccup fighting to protect his dragon...a man clubbing him unconscious...something hitting my head all all going black...

I quartered the cell, rubbing my head. Whoever else our captors were, there were much more efficient and organised than Alvin's people. The door was a standard hatch-but locked and I had the sense of movement and knew were travelling...though I had no clue where. I just hoped the others were able to follow our implanted trackers. And I was worried...not for my dragon but for my boyfriend, because he wasn't here and he had been riding the Night Fury that everyone seemed after. My fists clenched and I slammed them against the walls, scamming in rage.

Breathing hard, I leaned against the door and stared across the empty room. I missed Hiccup. But I didn't want to brood: I needed to find a way out of here. So I curled my fingers and tapped against the metal wall...H...I...C...U...P... I knew he knew Morse code and hoped he was listening. And I prayed he was in any sort of a state to answer.

Eventually, having paced back and forth and listened at the hatch, I settled back on the floor, facing the door and waited, trying to close my eyes and clear my mind: it was a technique I had been taught during my martial arts training. Of course, possessing a ferocious temper, it clearly wasn't something I practised on a regular basis, but I knew now I needed to think clearly. We had no intelligence, no coms with Base and I had no idea where our dragons were. My CO was missing and I needed to work out what was happening.

Finally, I heard footsteps approach and got to my feet as the the clang of the lock being unlatched echoed. The heavy metal door swung in and a tall, black-clad shape was shoved in, stumbling unsteadily and legs almost collapsing. Hiccup lifted his head determinedly and staggered forward, his teeth gritted and face very pale. I hastened to his side, gratefully feeling his arms catch my shoulders but he held me at arm's length and I felt the first frisson of concern at the lack of response.

"Are you...?" I asked. There was a pause.
"I am fine, Rider," he said coldly, his forest green eyes sweeping coolly over me. I stared at him and wondered what was going on: his tone was completely different to any I had heard.

"What…?"

"As I said, not very bright but very gullible," he said coldly, staring at me but talking to someone else. I saw movement behind him and a big guy appeared: taller than Hiccup by half a head with shaven head, dark, cruel eyes and a stripe of a beard across his chin. Another man—slightly smaller with the same cold dark eyes, manicured beard and very tightly cropped back hair followed, his manner imperious.

"You said she would trust you," the smaller man said, his tone cruel but amused.

"Yes—she underestimates me, just like everyone else," Hiccup said in a bitter voice. "But she also imagines she's in love with me. She's a new Rider—but she has the next fastest dragon, which is why I get landed with her. But you can see…blonde, brainless and completely gullible." I stared at him, feeling betrayed at his words.

"H-hiccup?" I asked, hating myself for stammering. He looked at me mockingly.

"Did you expect me just to take it…again?" he asked me shortly. "Expect poor little Hiccup to be tortured and just accept it? To protect BERK when BERK doesn't protect me? To be someone else's punching bag again when my own father wants to ground me and throw me in jail? When the great General wishes I didn't been born?" His tone dropped. "Maybe it's time to give him reason to regret that!"

"Hiccup…you can't..." I breathed,

"YES I CAN!" he shouted in my face and I recoiled. "Ryker..." he gestured to the big guy, "...and Viggo..." the imperious, dark-haired man, "...Grimborn have made me a better offer."

"You traitor," I growled through my teeth.

"Oh no," he told me mockingly. "You can only be a traitor if you're part of something willingly. I was never part pf BERK: I was just the passenger, the conscript, the runt...the accidental Rider...Useless..."

"Being in BERK gave you Toothless!" I pleaded.

"That it did!" he scoffed. "But it took more: my self-respect, my leg, my entire life, my future...but now I have a chance to do something for me, for once..."

"And us?" I breathed.

"I don't think there ever was any us," he mocked me. "You got yourself worked up over an illusion, over someone who doesn't exist." I slapped him, fury coiled in my chest at his cruel words. He stared at me for a second, then turned to Ryker.

"As I said, not very bright," he scoffed and I could feel my face crease in a scowl.

"Where's my dragon?" I snarled at him. He turned back, his expression cold.

"We'll keep the Nadder," he told me. "Toothless likes her as company. And you won't need her." The dismissal was like a knife in my heart and I glared at him, feeling hatred rise in my chest.
"I should have left you to die in that alley!" I spat and he stiffened slightly.

"Well, that's another mistake you made...babe..." he sneered and I lost it, swinging for him and punching him hard. He staggered back, a hand rising to his face where my fist had impacted—and I spun, my booted foot hammering into his chest, slamming him onto his back. I flung myself onto him, my fist swinging again...and I was dragged off off him after getting in another good hit. Restrained, kicking and furious, I glared as he slowly rolled to his knees and staggered to his feet. Ryder loomed above me and I steeled myself for a blow but Hiccup raised a hand, his other still pressed against his bleeding lip.

"No," he said coldly. "Leave her here. When we get to your island, we can have some amusement...you did mention a hunt?"

"With me as quarry, you bastard?" I spat.

"If only," he sighed mockingly. "But I am pretty certain the General is still my father...though that's not really working out. So I finally choose my own side...and you're on the wrong one, Astrid. Thanks for bringing the Nadder—I'm sure my new friends can find a suitable use for her!" And then he turned and walked out. I was tossed aside and as I scrambled up, the door slammed closed, trapping me in the cell...with no hope of rescue. I stared at the door and felt my eyes burning with tears of rage and betrayal, my heart breaking.

"Oh, Hiccup," I murmured.

oOo

"Quite a spitfire," Ryker growled, his tone part amused and part annoyed. "I thought you said she was a junior rider."

"She is," Hiccup said, tenderly rubbing his jaw and tasting blood. Astrid's punches had probably been harder than Dagur's—and with far more reason. "But she's no patsy. She can fight and she has some skills—but she's naive, straight out of school and no practical experience. She's easy to manipulate and easy to fool." Viggo narrowed his eyes.

"And you've fooled her?"

"BERK was never my home," he admitted. "I was dragged along by my father—speak to Drago if you want to know all about him!"

"A wise policy is never to speak to Drago unless absolutely necessary," Viggo said in his smooth, calculating tone. "The man has a mind like a steel trap—and Bludvist is an implacable enemy." The younger man instinctively moved his left hand, his thumb going to ghost over the puckered scar at the base of his little finger.

"Got that," he said. Viggo's brows dipped and he inspected the young rider calculatingly.

"You've met?"

"Yeah—coupla times. But I only really spoke to him over a vidlink," Hiccup admitted. "He kidnapped the girl and I while we out on a training mission. He didn't know I was the Night Fury Rider...but they tortured me anyway. He was going to cut me to pieces to punish my father...but that ship has sailed. The General loathes me with a passion—he wants to throw me in the brig and take my dragon! No man would do that to a son he cared for!" Ryder chuckled darkly.

"You could always join our family..." he invited Hiccup but the young Rider flicked his forest
"Flattered but I'm off the idea of family, to be frank," he said calmly. "What family I had all tried to hurt me…and mostly succeeded. The General abandoned me and had me tortured by his brother, our former head of security. His son used to kick the crap outta me. I'm done with them all."

"And the girl? If you don't want her, I'm sure I can have some fun with her…" The threat was implicit and Hiccup looked up at him, then shook his head.

"I prefer the original plan," he said firmly. "Now she thinks she's alone, we can hunt her. She's got some survival skills so it should be a fair fight."

"I'd rather have some fun with her first…" Ryker insisted but Hiccup shook his head, gaze narrowing as he read the bigger man's proclivities.

"Astrid is a feisty woman and a fighter," he told the big man. "You'd have to injure her significantly to rape her-and that would ruin my plan. When we recapture her after the hunt-then you can fuck her however you want!"

"Why are you so set on hunting her?" Viggo insisted.

"Because I know how it feels," Hiccup told him sharply. "I tried escaping before, once they had try to make me reveal where my dragon was concealed. I got as far as I could…but I was ill, a result of my injuries and I ran into her!" His voice had hardened. "She took me in and saved my life…but she betrayed me to the General and they recaptured me and Toothless. So because of her, I was condemned to go back there, to return to my Hel…until I could finally get away. You made me the offer at precisely the right time…" Viggo gave a smile that never reached his eyes.

"And we are the winners," he commented. "You have incredible skills with dragons…and your Night Fury will be an invaluable asset."

"You will still have to deal with Drago-because he wants the Night Fury for his plan," Ryker reminded him and the young man ran his fingers through his messy auburn hair.

"As long as he doesn't get the wrong idea," he said firmly. "I have thrown my lot in with you, not him."

"We are, of course, his allies," Viggo reminded him calmly, his eyes calculating. "Only a fool would be his enemy."

"I suspect he may be ambiguous to my status," Hiccup replied, his face shadowed. "I am prepared to work with him-as long as there are no more knives involved!" Ryder's heavy eyebrow raised and Hiccup shoved his sleeve up, revealing the huge fresh scar on his arm. Both men's eyes widened. "As I said…no knives!" Ryder clapped him across the shoulder.

"You're a Grimborn now!" he said gruffly. "And we protect our own!"

"What do you mean, vanished?" Stoick growled, pacing the Command Centre. Gobber frowned and glanced over to Will, who was bent over the coms, interrogating the system. Sergeant Grimsdaal, who was senior security officer on duty, scowled.

"As soon as Will warned of the anomaly, radio contact was lost and com signals became all but unrecordable," he reported.
"All but?" Stoick pressed.

"The signals are very faint and intermittent," Will reported. "It's like there's interference...or they're shielded."

"How?" the General growled.

"Unknown...though the anomaly has to be a possibility," Grimsdaal admitted. "Satellite imagery had shown...this..." A super-magnified image of the sleek grey submarine vessel looking like the smooth back of a humpback that was visible at the time of contact loss was put on the screen.

"What the Hel is that?" Stoick shouted.

"It's not on any database," Will reported. Gobber shifted his bulk and leaned forward.

"Can ye enhance that area?" he asked, gesturing with his hook. Will nodded and the grainy image sharpened and a red symbol appeared. "Hmm...we may not know what it's but we do know who it is," he muttered. "Grimborn. The Dragon Hunters have them."

"Snotlout!" the General shouted over the com.

"Sir?" the reply came.

"Anything?"

"Nothing!" the sergeant reported. "No wreckage, no bodies, no sign of any trackers...nothing."

"You've checked thoroughly?" Stoick asked.

"Standard search pattern by grid-and repeated twice per your orders," Snotlout said clearly. "We even extended the pattern for one klick in all directions but nothing. Eret's Skullcrusher can't detect anything-and he's the best tracker dragon in the team."

"It's been four hours, Stoick," Gobber reminded him softly. "If they've drowned, they're buried under a mile of water...but more likely, they're long gone in that ship..."

"And we need to know where..." Stoick realised. "Boost the tracking signal and recruit satellites from all ally organisations. Widen the search area to the whole of the North Sea...and get the Riders back. No point in leaving them out there. We need them rested for when we have a target destination,"

"Come home, laddie!" Gobber commanded Snotlout. "We'll debrief on your return..."

"But..."

"For the moment, Hiccup and Astrid are gone, laddie," Gobber told him. "But don't worry...we'll get them back..."

oOo

"Is that all of them?" Viggo asked, his dark eyes tracking every movement the young Rider made. Nodding, Hiccup trailed a gentle hand over Toothless's shoulder, gently stroking the small wound where he had removed the tracker.

"Yeah. After I tried to get him away, they implanted him with a couple of trackers...and they thought I didn't know..." he said in a bitter voice. "I was prevented from even seeing him until he
"was 'secured', though I was only biding my time. And, of course, I needed them to dispatch Alvin and Dagur."

"Yes...the subjects you refuse to elaborate on..." Viggo noted calmly, measuring his opponent. Hiccup stilled, his hand pressing a little harder against the dragon.

"For personal reasons," he said tonelessly. Viggo leaned closer.

"Was he your lover?" he asked smoothly. Hiccup flinched.

"No!" he said too rapidly. "No, he imagined we had a connection, imagined that there was some mutual affection, some mutual feeling...but the only feeling we shared was hatred." Viggo quietly laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder, testing him...and was satisfied as Hiccup stiffened. He lifted his wary green gaze and stared unabashedly at Viggo. "What is it about all you people?" he asked pointedly. Viggo withdrew his hand, reading determination in the bruised face then turned to meet Ryker's dark gaze. The brothers' eyes locked just for a second but knew the meaning: an opportunity.

"You are aware you are very pretty?" Viggo asked him, leaning against the wall of the pen area and folding his arms. Hiccup's wary gaze flicked back to read his face and looked back at Toothless. The way both the Grimborns looked at him was very unnerving and though they did not exude the raw violent menace of Dagur, neither gave him much confidence and he already guessed they wouldn't hesitate to resort to violence if they thought it would be to their advantage—or fun...

"Uh, no," Hiccup told him quietly. "Spent my life being called scrawny, runt, fishbone, skinny, dork...none of which means pretty. And I'm not sure I actually want either of you thinking that way anyway..." Ryker smirked and folded his arms.

"As Viggo said, you're a Grimborn now...and we ought to make you feel welcome...and part of the family..." he said with a covetous expression on his face.

Oh Thor...I'm really sure I don't want any part of that sort of family activity... Hiccup thought desperately as he stroked Toothless. "Have you contacted Drago?" he asked aloud, his hand moving rhythmically over the warm scales on Toothless's muzzle, masking his anxiety. Viggo sighed.

"He will meet your terms, boy," he admitted. "Your Night Fury is a very powerful lever—and Bludvist has coveted it since he realised it existed. The operation is already underway."

"I have forwarded the specifications for the antitoxin," Hiccup said calmly. "I trust it will have been synthesised by the time we meet?"

"Drago Bludvist is a man of his word, Hiccup," Viggo warned him calmly. "He always meets his end of the bargain but he doesn't tolerate any reneging or treachery."

"And he understands I am not his," Hiccup emphasised sternly, turning to face Viggo. "I work for myself...for us. I will not be his toy or pawn again." He blinked. "I won't be anyone's pawn again."

oOo

"Augmentation of the trackers hasn't really worked," Will confided in Gobber as the Colonel checked in on the security station. The IT tech was best able to manipulate the technology but he was alarmed by what he had found. "Two of Toothless's trackers had been removed or disabled. Someone has deliberately destroyed them."
"And they couldn't have found them…without Hiccup's help," Gobber realised, staring at the IT tech before him. "He knew where they were-I knew he accessed the secure folder, even though he tried to cover his tracks because we knew he would and were waiting for it. He knows the locations of all four. So why only remove two?"

"Maybe they were the only ones accessible?" Will suggested.

"Or because he had to give up something…because he's not made of stone and he's suffered far too much already," Gobber guessed, fearing for the young man. "And his father would never understand…because he's military, born and bred. But Hiccup…isn't. And he was never trained to resist torture or interrogation and apart from Toothless, why should he endure all sorts of pain to protect an organisation that has treated him so badly and a father who barely treats him as human, let alone a son? What has he got to care for?"

"Lieutenant Astrid…" Will murmured and Gobber's unibrow dipped further.

"Who is with him," he realised. "Any clue where they are?"

"The signals are still muffled…and the surface satellite imagery doesn't show any vessels…so we have to assume that vessel was a submarine," Will began and Gobber rolled his eyes.

"Any time today, laddie," he grumbled.

"The vessel is moving fast-close to forty knots," Will reported. "Heading is 275…" Gobber frowned. "Iceland, east coast."

"Drago Bludvist," Gobber realised. "He's being taken to Drago."

oOo

They hadn't bothered to lock his cell because they had Toothless under lock and key and anyway-where was there to go? They were cruising at approximately a hundred metres below the surface of the North Atlantic heading towards Veidimadurinnfloi-Hunter's Cove-a small island and mainland base on the northeastern edge of Iceland, not that far from Drago's main base of operations at Akureyri. He sighed and stared up at the low metal ceiling, his right leg bent and left lying flat on the bed.

In the end, he couldn't do it, couldn't face being someone else's punch-bag again, face having his flesh cut into and battered, his bones bruised and broken. He couldn't do it again because suddenly, he was tired. Tired of doing everything with every ounce of his strength and never being good enough. Tired of always being the target, the butt of the joke, the person who ended up captured and hurt. Tired of being torn apart by his father's disappointment and hatred. So when the first blows had landed, he had pushed aside the feelings of shame and waved his arms in surrender, mind whirling and desperate to find some way to navigate through this with Toothless safe…because Toothless was everything.

He blinked at the piteousness of his life, eyes burning with shameful tears as he tried not to remember all those times. Because, in the Hel of his life, in the years of pain and torment and crushing misery in BERK, Toothless had been the one being who had been pleased to see Hiccup. The dragon had been his only true friend and protector and being with Toothless was the only time he had felt safe. In fact, though he had told Astrid that Fishlegs sometimes went to sleep with his dragon, Hiccup couldn't count the number of nights when he had done the same, slinking to the pen with his blanket and curled up against the warm scaly body and sleeping safe, wrapped in the wide bat-wings.
He pressed his hands to his face and groaned. He couldn't get to sleep with all those thoughts racing around his head. Because in BERK, there were two places he could feel safe: Toothless's wings...and in Astrid's arms. Backed into a corner and in full knowledge of what he faced in BERK and what he had to do, he had made his choice...and had felt the full weight of his decision. He hoped Astrid would understand, hoped she would one day forgive him. But right now, he had to keep Toothless safe, had to stop Drago getting his hands on the dragon...even if it meant staying here with him.

He sat up, his legs swinging round and finding the floor. He bowed forward, swiping moisture off his face, breathing hard. He needed Astrid but he had made the choice, the only choice he could. Astrid or Toothless: Toothless had won. He stood.

The dragons were heavily guarded but they let him see them because Viggo and Ryker had left orders that their new Dragon Whisperer was to be given free access to calm and tame the beasts. So he was able to walk to Toothless's cage, leaning against the heavy bars and reaching his hands through to caress the scale head. Toothless pressed his muzzled nose into Hiccup's hand without hesitation, crooning sadly...and the sound broke Hiccup's already battered heart.

"I'm sorry, bud," he murmured. "You'll be out soon...but they can't have you wandering around the ship...and certainly can't risk you firing a plasma bolt through the hull and sinking us all!" The pupils narrowed very slightly and Hiccup felt the dragon pull away. "Buddy...I know you wanted to fight, know you think we could've broken free...but if we had, they would've killed Astrid and Stormfly. You didn't want that, did you, buddy?" There was a huff...but Toothless gave a small whine and lowered his head. "Yeah, we should've seen if, should've suspected...but when I heard Dad, all I could think of was getting the Terrors back and not being kept from you for so long..."

Toothless gave a little rumble and Hiccup hugged him desperately.

"Trust me, bud," he murmured. "This will all work out okay."

Then he moved along to see Stormfly. The Nadder was also muzzled and unhappy but she came to the tall, lanky Rider and rubbed her face against his hand, grateful for the company. His hand gentle curled around her nose horn, he stared into he yellow eyes. "I'm sorry, girl," he sighed. "I know this isn't fair. But trust me, I will sort this out. I won't let anything happen to you..." Then he turned to the final cage, the walls mesh, not bars because the smaller Night Terrors could slip between the bars of the other larger dragons' cages. Reluctantly, the guards let him in and he dropped to his knees, sitting placidly in the cage, staring down and waiting for the dragons to recognise his scent, his shape...and finally he felt the pressure of a nose against each hand. He looked down to see Smidvarg and one of the black Night Terrors nuzzling him. The other two were standing by his legs, purring. Gently, he smiled and rubbed the little white leader and lifted him against his chest, feeling the purr vibrate through his body.

"I know you're scared," he murmured softly. "I know your want your herd...and I guess I know where they are. But you don't have to worry: we will find them and you can be back with your kind..." He paused. "And free..." He murmured. Whimpering, the snuggled against him and wearily, he lowered his body to the floor of the cage. He already knew they wouldn't let him enter Toothless's cage...but he was here, with warm, trusting creatures and he curled up, feeling them press against him. Hating himself, he closed his eyes but the purring of the Night Terrors momentarily eased the aching hollow on his core from his betrayal and he finally drifted off to sleep.

oOo

When the door to my cell creaked open, I was on my feet, fists curled and in fighting stance. But
the guards brought me water and some kind of dry rations and I ate because I needed to stay alive and rescue my dragon. As soon as I was done, I was taken to the main hold door and realised that sometime during the night, we had docked. I was led blindfolded with my wrists bound down a ramp onto the uneven gritty ground and a cold wind bit into my cheeks. I stumbled and hands grabbed my arms, preventing me from falling. I could smell the sea, the scents of dragon dung and bad body odour from the man to my left.

My blindfold was pulled down and I stared at Ryker, Viggo…and Hiccup, all standing cockily on a black volcanic shore. There were building behind them, grey blockhouses and the howls of dragons in distress. I felt my lip curl in anger.

"Where am I?" I demanded. "Where is Stormfly?"

"The dragon is no longer your concern," Viggo said coldly, his dark eyes sweeping over me. His bigger and uglier brother was eyeing me unpleasantly and my palms itched. I turned my scornful gaze to Hiccup, his bruised face impassive, still wearing hi black flight suit.

"And me? What are you bastards planning?" I spat, struggling against my captors. My former boyfriend lifted his green eyes and looked straight at me, his expression hard.

"We are going to hunt you for sport," he said calmly. "And when we catch you, we will kill you!"
Forty-Six: An audience with the devil.

The breath was hot in my throat as I ran over the rugged and uneven volcanic terrain of eastern Iceland. I'd read up on the enemies we were facing and knew that Drago Bludvist was based in Iceland…and there were few places in the direction we had headed which had volcanos with glaciers on in plain view. It wasn't a difficult deduction to be honest. But that didn't especially matter because I was running for my life.

Thankfully, I had kept up my schedule and I was pretty fit—a daily 10km run was pretty handy given my current predicament—but the terrain was uneven and I was in my uniform boots, not my running shoes. Also, it was sub-zero and my face was freezing. There was precious little cover and no sign of anyone around who could help. And I had thirty-four minutes left. Yes, they had given me my com back so I would know the time and how long I had left to live. They would be after me in one hour—in jeeps and possible on dragon-back. I wondered how Hiccup would get Toothless to fire at me and prayed the dragon was at least more decent than his master. And my fists ached to hit him for his betrayal.

I blinked, eyes burning with tears and I swiped one away as I stumbled up the loose slope. I couldn't waste energy on the bastard: I had to focus. But I had fallen in love with Hiccup and for him to dismiss me, to betray us all…it killed me. He had helped them steal my dragon and send me on this sadistic hunt. And I wondered what I could possibly have done to deserve this…when I had been his staunchest supporter, friend and protector in BERK. When I had given him my trust and my love. I honestly didn't think it would hurt as much if I had found him in our bed screwing one of the tech staff. And it hurt more because I had been fooled, been convinced that he was a good guy. I had been wrong.

I paced myself, knowing it was no use wearing myself out in a frantic dash and taking the time as I ran up the slope to look for concealment points, roads, any signs of civilisation…but there was nothing. I accelerated over the top of a low mountain and sped up down the slope. I checked: ten minutes and then they would be after me. Would I hear the whistle of the Night Fury wings, closing on me or would it be the roar of a jeep, the crunch of tyres and the chatter of machine gun fire? Then I screeched to a halt and hunkered down, breathing hard. The lying scumbags: they already had men out ahead.

I saw him move and took my chance, sneaking down the slope and rushing him. He heard the last few steps and turned—but I wasn't taking any chances: I needed him down and out. I bore him down and landed on him, snatching a rock and cracking it firmly across his skull. I stared at him, breathing heavily: this wasn't in my Hippocratic Oath but my Army Oath definitely covered this one and I couldn't spare any regrets. I grabbed his knife, gun and ammo and snatched his walkie talkie then sprinted off down into the low valley. It was rocky and devoid of much vegetation except a few scrubby bushes so I sped through…and then my com alarmed.

The hour was up. And then the channel opened.

"I'm coming for you," Hiccup said.

I slapped the channel off then put my head down and accelerated, my grip on the gun tightening. It was a Glock, a weapon I had been trained to use and I felt more comfortable with it nestled in my hand…especially as I had a very sharp and large knife in the other. Of course, I knew I couldn't fight my way out of here but it gave me options…and I really needed options. And then I hunkered
down and shook my head: I wasn't thinking.

I peered at my com. Theoretically, it had limited range but there was an emergency channel, limited band width but almost global range. I thumbed it on and began tapping with my finger on the device, painstakingly sending a message in Morse to the base.

ASTRID…CAPTIVE…DRAGONS TOO…GRIMBORN…ICELAND…HICCUP IS TRAITOR…SOS…SOS…SOS…

There was still a thick silence over the little valley as I listened…then scrambled up and ran on. I was running through expanded cracks in basalt-frozen lava, probably extruded many thousands or millions of years ago. The black ruffled surface was slippery and uneven but I was sprinting through narrow canyons and there was very restricted view from overhead which should buy me more time. I caught the edge of something, all senses straining as I sprinted along now, realising my hunter was closing. The edge of a squawk echoed through the little valley and I peered up in shock, my eyes wide in horror: I hadn't expected this. He had brought Stormfly: the bastard was going to kill me with my own dragon!

I sped on and as the black, cracked walls widened apart, I saw the familiar, beautiful, blue and gold shape zoom down and hover in front of me. The lean, black-clad shape on her back had me snapping the Glock up and levelling it at his head, my eyes narrowing on his bruised face, the familiar wild auburn hair and brilliant green eyes confusing me.

"Stormfly?" I called. "Hey, girl…"

"She'll respond to her rider," he called back.

"Why?"

"I may be on their side, but they don't trust me with Toothless," he called back bitterly. "They know if they have him, I will come back. And Nadders are excellent tracking dragons." And there it was-the flash of the young man I knew, the dorky dragon-loving IT specialist who couldn't resist sharing his knowledge.

"We're alone now, babe," I said, giving him one last chance…because my heart really wanted to believe it was an act. I thought I had seen a plea to play along—or had I? "Tell me what the plan is? I buy the act…"

"You know, I never got the blonde thing…but are you really that stupid?" he mocked me. I stared up into those taunting green eyes.

"Hiccup…babe…after all we've been through, please just be honest," I asked him softly, the horrible unsettled feeling in my stomach worsening.

"Well, babe, the honest truth is…I don't love you. Never did." I suppressed a gasp of pain. "From the first time I was conscious of you, I realised you were protective and sympathetic. You felt sorry for poor battered little Hiccup and you loved the pathetic helpless dorky boy act. So I played you, Milady, so I had an ally, someone having my back. And I don't deny to was pretty nice making out with you, blondie, but I never loved you. I only love one person-and he's in chains back in the Base, held against my compliance."

"And this 'hunt' farce?" I said, my voice cold and trying to keep my aim steady.

"Fun," he said cruelly. "In case you harboured any lingering delusions about me."
"No," I said in a barely steady voice. "I think all my delusions have been dispelled."

"Then you better run, sweetheart-because Ryker is itching to get his hands on you-and you aren't gonna like what he's planned!" he warned me sneeringly. My finger tightened on the trigger.

"I can put a bullet between your eyes!" I snarled at him.

"And Stormfly will put a spine in your heart!" he retorted.

"Will she?" I taunted him. "I thought it was about trust, Hiccup? Or was that another lie from the world's greatest liar? So is she going to trust you over me? I am her rider, not you." He gave a small smile.

"Bet your life on it?"

"You already have, you bastard!" I shouted at him. "I can understand you having Daddy issues-or issues with the whole set-up of BERK…but what about me, Hiccup? What precisely did I do for you to turn on me? Even if you didn't love me-I saved your life. I had your back. Don't you have any human feelings?" He stared at me and his green eyes wouldn't meet mine.

"I have my reasons," he said quietly, his voice uneven…but he forced himself to give a small smile.

"They had better be fucking good!" I spat. "Because I will hunt you down and see you put in jail for the rest of your wretched life, Hiccup. And you will never see Toothless again!"

"Wow. I knew you had a temper, Astrid…I may have had a lucky escape!" he scorned me.

"So you are just going to hold me up until your friends, the Grimborns, catch me?"

"Something like that," he admitted with a smirk. I cocked the gun.

"Stormfly? FLIP!" I shouted and fired at him. Instinctively, he ducked and in that moment, she bucked hard, ejecting him sideways. He didn't have his usual saddle and he wasn't clipped in so he flew sideways, hitting the wall hard and tumbling to the ground. The fall was only ten feet or so—but it was enough to have him groaning as he slammed into solid rock while I raced towards my dragon, who immediately landed and squawked towards me. I caressed her face urgently then spun to cover Hiccup. I saw him reaching for the gun on his hip and I didn't hesitate to kick him hard, hearing him grunt in pain.

"Stay still!" I snarled as he lifted his head, his features tight with pain.

"Ast-Astrid…" he breathed then grimaced. "It has to be this way!" I leapt onto Stormfly.

"No, it doesn't," I hissed. "But you betrayed me, Hiccup. I'm the only person in BERK who loves-loved-you. I would kill for you. But now I find it was all a lie. You left me imprisoned and you threw your lot in with them. You rejected me! And this…this treachery…was it all your idea…?"

"Glad you appreciate the effort…" Hiccup murmured, his head bowed. He didn't deny it—and they weren't around. No one was. I had to give him one last chance because I knew him: my heart was screaming at me that this wasn't Hiccup. It had to be an act…

"Hiccup…please…you-you know I-I…love you and you said that you…” He stiffened and lifted his head. The expression made my blood run cold.
"And that's just pathetic, Astrid," he told me, his eyes locking coldly on my face. "Did I not speak clearly? I don't love you." I felt that like a knife in the heart. "I played you. I played them all. All I wanted was to get away."

"Well, you succeeded…but I'm coming for you!" I snapped, feeling Stormfly fidget and shuffle: pursuit must be closing. "You know, I was so grateful, so proud when you killed Dagur, when you saved me…when you said it was for me…but now I wonder did you just kill him for you?" His eyes darkened in hurt but my aim was steady, the Glock covering him efficiently. "I don't know what to believe any more-and you claim you never really felt anything for me. So was it him? Did you kill him because of your relationship?" He grimaced, his shoulders suddenly rigid.

"There was no relationship," he said, breathing hard. I snorted.

"Keep telling yourself that, Hiccup!" I sneered. "You're the only one who believes it. I can tell it…and I think most of the others suspect as well. The way you react is a giveaway. And no matter what you claim, Dagur did have sex with you, didn't he? And you killed him. Maybe I'm the one who had the lucky escape!"

"They're closing on you, Astrid…" he said roughly, his hand resting against his head, grimacing. I looked away from him and patted my girl's head.

"Up, up!" I urged and we arrowed straight up into the clouds, stealing one last glance at the sprawled, skinny, black-clad shape with the messy auburn hair and almost plaintive green eyes before he vanished along with the ground. I tapped urgently on my com.

**HEADING HOME…SEND ESCORT…LONG FLIGHT AHEAD…**

My hand slid down and found my helmet, unexpectedly stowed on the saddle and I sighed, slipping it on and accessing the com-link to the Base.

"Hofferson to Base…I'm on my way home…"

"Thank the Gods, Lieutenant," came the General's voice. "Are you alone?"

"Very much so," I reported stiffly. "I regret to report…your son has betrayed us. He's a traitor."

"You let them get the Nadder." Ryder's deep voice was accusing and the man himself paced across the room, his fists clenched while Hiccup sat slumped in a chair, his hand resting against his aching head. The brothers had harangued him non-stop for fifteen minutes and even if his head hadn't been aching from the impact on the rocky wall of the gulley and then the ground, it would be now. "Have you any idea how much we could have made from that dragon?"

"No," Hiccup replied roughly. "Not my job!"

"It is now…and you're not doing much of one!" Ryker sneered at him. "You should've just let me have the girl." Hiccup shook his head.

"I said she was dangerous and resourceful," he muttered.

"And yet you insisted on the hunt," Ryker accused him. Hiccup's green eyes flicked up, inspecting the other man and realising he was enjoying undermining the newcomer.

"Which you suggested and told me was going to happen when you started…interrogating me," he
said quietly, wincing as he moved. Astrid's kick had been hard and he had jarred his back when he fell.

"Enough," Viggo cut in, his voice edged with irritation. "The Nadder is gone. You should have called and we could have sent a dragon to retrieve her…"

"The only dragon that could catch Astrid on Stormfly is Toothless," Hiccup told him bluntly. "Can't see you letting me ride my Night Fury after her and away from here…"

"Was that your plan?" Ryker menaced, walking to tower over the skinny shape. "Fool us, get us to play along…and just fly out of here?"

"And go where?" Hiccup snapped, straightening up. "BERK? I've been trying to get out of that place for years. Drago? Yeah, that's gonna work out well. Alvin's dead…"

"And yet you wanted to speak with Drago…" Viggo told him, drifting closer and inspecting the young man facing them. Hiccup ran his hands through his messy auburn mop and groaned.

"It's the pre-emptive strike," he sighed. "If we can reach an agreement with Drago on our terms, it prevents him…taking what he wants by force. The man has tried to kill me twice. I don't want a third attempt. Especially since the reason why he is after me is irrelevant."

"Oh?" Viggo's eyebrow quirked and he moved closer.

"Drago is a very bad man—I don't think that is in doubt—and my father worked in military intel…chasing Drago," Hiccup explained bitterly. "So Drago decided to send a message—and sent hit men to run his family off the road. It was a partial success: my Mom died but I survived…just. However, my father blamed me for surviving so he more or less abandoned me and my life was literally Hel. When he retired to BERK, he dragged me along, ripping me from my whole life back home and locking me up in a base in a mountain in Scotland. When he kidnapped the girl and I when we out on a mission, he found out I was Stoick's son and decided to torture me to death to send a message to him. But the truth is that it was wasted effort because Stoick doesn't give a damn. He wishes I was never born." He paused. "So I'm going to make him regret I was."

I was met by Snotlout and Gustav a hundred miles northeast of the Outer Hebrides and they escorted Stormfly and I almost silently back to the Base. I was exhausted, in turmoil and was grateful that my companions recognised that I didn't want to talk. But what really got me, made a lump in my throat and my eyes burn with tears, was that the whole of the Team were waiting in the Glen, outside Pen One, hovering quietly to welcome us back.

Once my girl was back on the ground, I quietly unsaddled her, fed her some prime cod and gave her a long hug, silently savouring her presence, her safety. And then I turned round to see the Team waiting.

"Good to have you back L-T," Eret said genuinely.

"We missed you," Cami added.

"Are you okay?" Fishlegs checked.

"Okay, people-she's had a really long flight and must be exhausted," Snotlout cut in, moving to my side. I glanced up: he wasn't making a move on me—because in my current mood, I was so off men I would break his neck without hesitation—but he was just protecting me from my concerned
comrades. I nodded and walked quietly back with them to the main area. Snotlout paused, his eyes apologetic. "The General wants to see you," he said.

I nodded: I had been expecting that. Flashing him the merest hint of a grateful smile, I headed up to the General's office and knocked. I was admitted immediately— and found Stoick, Gobber and Sergeant Grimsdaal all waiting for my arrival. I lifted my chin, stood to attention and saluted.

"At ease," the General said and gestured to the chair: I gratefully sat, my head muzzy with exhaustion and misery as he leaned forward and glared at me. "What do you mean, my son is a traitor?" he growled.

"Exactly what I said," I told him dully. Suddenly, I felt exhausted, numb and empty. "He caved. We were captured and we were separated. When he was brought into my cell, he was clearly with them. He…spurned me, spurned the whole of BERK and had…turned." I stared at the floor.

"Lass…are you…?" Gobber asked and I shook my head.

"No," I said quietly. "I'm unharmed…physically…but I…he…" I closed my eyes. "He betrayed me. They took us to the Grimborn base in eastern Iceland and released me…to hunt me." There was a silent pause and I stared at the floor again. "He came after me on Stormfly…I think he overestimated his capabilities because she is my dragon and she threw him. I-I wanted to bring him back but they were closing and I would have needed to beat him senseless to carry him safely and quietly, I didn't have the time. But I need to go after him, sir. He betrayed me worst of all."

"No, Lieutenant…he betrayed me…" Stoick began and then I snapped, lurching to my feet, my eyes shining with tears.

"No! YOU ARE THE REASON HE'S GONE!" I shouted at him. He blinked and I saw his face begin to grow red with anger—but I didn't care. "And before you open your mouth to make some fatuous and ill-considered statement…sir…I would suggest you think back to when you last really treated him as a son? Maybe before your wife died? Because since then, you have done everything you could to damage, ignore and ruin him. While he was here, abused and treated as a pariah, you listened to everyone but your own son. I believe he even had to make appointments to see you—you own damned son! And I thought you had begun to understand what an amazing man he was, what astonishing potential and skills he possessed. And then you pull that crap over the Night Terrors!"

"Lieutenant… I would strongly advise you to…" he growled.

"OR WHAT?" I yelled in his face. "Do they know? Do they understand what an evil bastard and despicable human being their honoured commander is?" I flicked my blue gaze to the other men who were both looking very uncomfortable…and then shocked at my question. "Clearly not!"

"Er…lass? What are ye…?" Gobber began as I clenched my fists.

"The General here, while on enforced medical leave, insisted on challenging Hiccup's plan to use the Terrors to locate the other hatched dragons and vetoed it—when he had no authority to do so. The ensuing argument was so ugly that he told his son he wished he had never been born, that he had been happier before they had him. And that he wished Hiccup had died instead of Hiccup's Mum." There was a shocked silence. I sighed heavily.

"He's vulnerable," I said in a quieter voice. "He really has no self-esteem after all the shit he endured here, from Spitelout, Dagur and the Riders and was just beginning to hope that he had a relationship with the father who had ignored him since he was three. Saying that…utterly broke him. It shattered him, Stoick! And then, when we chase after the Terrors who were released
without authority by Tuffnut, you give him another hard time and threaten to put him in jail and ground him. It wasn't his fault! But you try to take away his best friend by throwing him in jail and grounding him. That was probably the last straw. When they threatened him, when they wanted to hurt him...why would he want to protect BERK and you any more?"

I palmed a tear from my face. The General had closed his mouth and was starting to look shocked. He probably didn't know I knew...but Hiccup had shared it with me because he promised. "But in going because he couldn't stay here any more and be with Toothless-he had to leave me. You lost me my boyfriend, General. The only man I have ever loved. So excuse me if I don't think he betrayed you. You have got exactly what you deserved. You didn't want a son-so now you don't have one. And I don't have my Hiccup either. Good work, sir." I turned to the door. "Now, I'm tired. If you want to cite me for insubordination, be my guest. It would about par for your non-existent people and leadership skills!"

And with that, I walked to the door and closed it with the loudest slam I could manage...before breaking down in the corridor. Even the triumph of telling the General what an asshole he was couldn't lift my broken heart.

oOo

The SUVs bounced over the road as they sped towards the huge one-storey complex, framed against the volcanoes to the south. A faint trail of steam rose into the overcast sky from the personal geothermal power complex at the back of the site as they skidded round the curve and passed through a security fence, heavily guarded with armed men and the crowned dragon symbol of Bludvist. Hiccup glanced up as they approached, his stomach dancing. No matter how much he tried to convince the Grimborns, he was trembling at the thought of facing Drago. Images flashed through his memory: the confused, concussion-wrecked memory of the crash, of hugging the cooling body of his dead mother in the wreck; those moments as Drago's torturer sliced his arm open and then started sawing into his hand...and the encounter in the penthouse. The man had an unutterably evil aura and Hiccup had to use all his courage to maintain his front and seem calm.

They drew up at a large steel and glass door, more fitted for an industrial complex than a residence...though Drago's home was both. Viggo emerged first, smartly dressed in dark leathers, his calculating gaze sweeping over the guards who watched their every move: Drago mistrusted his enemies and watched his so-called allies even closer. Ryker followed him and Hiccup was last, remaining in his Dragon Rider uniform. His forest green eyes were wary as he walked into the enemy's stronghold, tense at all the men in guns...

Boy looks like he'll soil himself...Stoick's little embarrassment indeed...

Please rescue me...

He blinked, lengthening his stride to keep up. The place was cold and without character, putting him on edge. The main entrance hall and corridor were painted in white with dark brown wood vaulting in the ceiling and occasional black wood abstract Nordic sculptures on white columns, set back in recesses. In other alcoves, men in the familiar grey uniform stood still, their guns dark on their hips. An the only sound was the thud of their steps as they strode down the passage until they reached a wide metal door.

Behind was a huge office, all grey steel with screens all over the largest wall and a black wood desk, almost devoid of anything except a keyboard and a knife. And standing by the desk was the huge, menacing shape of Drago, his long jet dreadlocks swinging as he turned to face the visitors. His scarred, sallow face twisted into a smile, thin lips curling in a sneer.
"Stoick's little embarrassment!" he chuckled, his cruel deep voice echoing through the room.

"Not any more," Hiccup muttered and lifted his chin. Bludvist took a heavy step towards him…then looked thoughtfully at Viggo.

"I half thought you were exaggerating," he rumbled.

"I value our financial relationship too highly to jeopardise it with any embellishment," the younger Grimborn replied, his smooth delivery a little strained. "I was as surprised as you are when the boy crumbled as my men began to rough him up. He offered to join us…in return for the safety of his dragon."

"He's the Night Fury Rider," Drago growled. "So you promised him the Alpha dragon to control! I thought we had a contract, Grimborn!"

"And we do," Viggo said with a sigh. "But once we'd tenderised him a little and he begged to join us, he demonstrated what he had to offer and it became obvious that the dragon will not co-operate without him. He wants to be a contracted freelance."

"He keeps the dragon and works for me when I demand?" Drago clarified, cold, dead gaze locking on the lean shape, sheathed in the black and grey of his Night Fury. He could see the young man was afraid, though his expression tried to conceal the fear. Bludvist knew he could snap the boy in two and his men could take him any time—but he had agreed to the meeting.

"When he agrees," Viggo said smoothly. "But he is a Dragon Whisperer—which I believe you did not realise previously. He has an extraordinary talent for relating to the beasts, for calming and taming them. And with the discovery of another nest on Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa, he should prove invaluable in taming the hatchlings and getting them back here safely. Your man can't control everything and the missions are still dangerous: we can't spare the time to fight with terrified dragons and get them under control. We lost a Monstrous Nightmare and a Zippleback that way."

"I recall," Drago growled, displeased at the reminder as Hiccup flicked his gaze across to the Dragon Hunters, filing the information away for future reference. Then abruptly, Drago was in front of him, his huge hand grabbing Hiccup's face, his thick fingers sinking into the cool flesh, dead, dark eyes sweeping over the pale skin and boring deep into the green gaze.

"Let…me…go…" Hiccup said tightly. Drago's grip tightened.

"Why?" he growled. "I have my tool against Stoick and…"

"And you're really behind on the news," Hiccup told him tightly. "I've betrayed BERK and my father…well, he'll have disowned me. There is no value on torturing me to get at him…" Drago nodded and suddenly his men lunged forward, grabbing Hiccup's arms and holding him back. Another two men covered the Grimborns with their submachine guns as one of the men handed Drago a pair of metal shears—and then pulled Hiccup's left hand out.

"Maybe I should just check," he rumbled, a vicious look on his face as the shears closed around Hiccup's little finger, the metal cool over the ugly scars from previously. "I am sure most fathers would respond to receiving their child's finger by courier…"

"Stoick would just ask for the rest…in pieces if necessary…" Hiccup gasped. "But you maim me and you never get the Night Fury…and I never help you with your dragons…" Drago stared into the ashen face and read fear…but also determination. He held still for a long moment…then released the young man.
"Bring him to the pens," he growled and stalked through a sliding door set into one of the blank walls. The guards shoved the trembling Hiccup forward and the Grimborns trailed behind. Immediately, they were in a steel-lined passage that sloped downhill until they arrived at a sunken arena, the roof covered with a mesh of metal and chain, the walls composed of rock and cage doors. Without slowing, the huge bulk Bludvist headed straight for the far cage and the small dragon housed within. It whimpered.

Hiccup stopped as far away from Bludvist as he could manage while still being right at the cage door. His heart still felt as if it was hammering through his chest wall and his breathing had barely settled when he hunkered down and peered within.

It was very obvious that it was a young dragon, just about knee high though maybe six feet long, the blunt, flattened muzzle and sleek dark and paler grey body very familiar. A pair of bat-like wings were folded across the back as the long tail with terminal fins flicked. Big green eyes stared hopefully at the newcomer, a little croon sounding in the young hatchling's throat. Viggo and Ryker stared and Drago's thin lips pulled into a very menacing smile. Entranced, Hiccup extended a hand to the little dragon and it eagerly pressed its nose against his skin, purring.

"Is that…?" Ryker murmured. Drago gave a dark chuckle.

"Yes," he crowed. "It's a Night Fury."
Sinking

Forty-Seven: Sinking

Hiccup felt the small creature purring through his hand and a smile crossed his face. He couldn't help it: it brought back all those good memories of the best moment of his life, the time when he bonded with Toothless and gained his best friend, protector and confidante. He blinked: he had a human one of those as well but he had sacrificed that for the dragon. He extended his other arm and stroked the little warm face, feeling her butt against him.

"You wanted Toothless because you hatched her," he murmured. "And you want him to mate her…to create your own army of Night Furies…"

"Clever boy," Drago scoffed. "And you will train her to imprint on me…and to obey me!" Hiccup's forest green eyes flicked up and he nodded absently, rubbing the young dragon.

"What's your name, girl?" he murmured. The little dragon blinked, big green eyes wide and trusting. "Shadow? Night? Darkness?" The dragon gave a little croon. "Hmm…Darkness…maybe we need something a little more sexy…" He smiled self-consciously at the use of the word but he knew he was probably talking to his dragon's future mate. "Myrkr. Old Norse for 'darkness'. How's that sound, little bud?" The dragon rubbed against him again. "Myrkr it is." Drago leered down on the young Rider and hummed.

"I see you like her," he said seductively. "Maybe you wish to reconsider your stance on working for me?" Hiccup flicked his gaze up and stumbled to his feet, a sudden pain stabbing through his stump.

"Let me think…you just tried to cut my finger off…I think that's a resounding 'no'!" he replied, swallowing hard. "We stick to the original arrangement."

"And you help them to fetch my dragons from the nest—before the Russians or any other do-gooders stumble across them?" Drago demanded. Hiccup nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"And the other part of the deal?" he asked, feeling the tension zinging through him. Drago eyed him up and smirked.

"We have already acquired the asset you wished and have manufactured the antitoxin you sent the specifications for," Drago growled. "Though I would be interested in why you have mortgaged your future and your servitude for a woman…and not the one you arrived with?" Breathing hard, Hiccup stared at the little dragon, his shoulders slumping.

"I…owe her this," he murmured.

"As you didn't the blonde?" Viggo asked calculatingly, his dark eyes sweeping over the lean shape, seeing the younger man ashamedly shake his head.

"Will you commit to the rest of the bargain?" Hiccup asked hoarsely. Drago walked closer and rested his hand-hard-on his skinny shoulder, the fingers digging hard into the flesh.

"Will you deliver the Night Fury to me when I demand?" he breathed, his breath caressing Hiccup's cheek. Hiccup stiffened, the tension rigid through his body.

"Will you commit to the rest of the bargain?" he repeated. The grip tightened.
"Will you do what I demand?" Drago breathed. Hiccup shuddered, guilt warring with his fear.

"Toothless is mine," he repeated quietly. "I am mine. I work with the Hunters. I am not your toy. Will you commit to the rest of the bargain?" The grip tightened again and Drago's lips were almost brushing against his ear.

"Defy me, boy, and we will resume what we started," he growled and relaxed his hand, backing away. "Viggo—have the boy attend for regular training with the hatchling. And get those eggs soon—or I will lose those as well and someone will have to pay for that failure!" He turned. "Have the boy brought to me tomorrow…to start working with the hatchling." And then he walked away, leaving the trembling Hiccup staring after the tycoon and praying his gamble would work.

I awoke in my bed back in BERK, feeling exhausted and depressed. My wrist com had beeped and I dragged myself wearily to the shower room and stood under the water, allowing the warmth to permeate my numb body and wash the tears from my face. I was back in my old room, not feeling ready to go back into the room we had shared. I dressed in my uniform, braided my hair and walked out, heading for the Mess and breakfast.

When I got there, there were pitying eyes everywhere I moved. Tech staff and Riders all glanced up and then down again as I collected my porridge, missing the lanky shape I had eaten with almost since I arrived at BERK. Defeatedly, I sat at the Riders' table and poked my food disinterestedly. There was an awkward silence and I sipped my coffee and sighed.

"No one's died, guys," I said.

"Um…not yet," Cami commented. "But if you're right…" My eyes flicked up to glare at her.

"I am right," I said sharply. "The first time he came in after we had been captured, he claimed he had never loved me, claimed he played us all…and I hated him for that but a corner of me still hoped, still trusted maybe he was pulling off an act…had one of those brilliant, crazy plans…" I took another sip and blinked. "But when he was hunting me, I asked him…I begged him…to tell me the truth, tell me it was all a lie, an act…but he didn't. If anything, it was worse. He was…horrible…" I took a few slow breaths. "And I knew…that he wasn't who he claimed to be. He was just…a traitor…"

I felt a hand on my shoulder and found Ruff giving me a one-armed hug. Cami quickly moved to the other side and repeated the action, sandwiching me between them. "It's okay," Ruffnut murmured. "When Tuff and I get our hands on him, we'll make him regret being born…"

"We all will," Snotlout said through gritted teeth. "I-I can't believe my cousin…I mean he was useless and dorky but when Dad…he was really…kind…"

"And he was a great rider," Eret murmured.

"So are we going after him?" Gustav asked. There was silence. "What?"

"Yes," I ground through my teeth. "We are going after him…and when we catch him, he's being court martialed." Gustav stared around.

"What?"

"The penalty for treason is life in prison," Eret explained.
"Or death," I added. They stared at me and I rose, dumping my breakfast and pausing. "Can you do me a favour Tuff, Snot? Can you move my things back to my old room please?" They stared at each other and then reluctantly nodded, hearing the coldness in my voice. They had all been in on his plan to move us in together and the more I thought about it, the less it made sense. I mean…I was certain that Hiccup was in trouble. The man who had nervously and carefully organised the move in together wasn't a man who would callously cast me aside, would 'play' me and the system. I knew genuinely how appallingly he was treated and I had felt his pain and treated him when he had suffered so badly. And I had felt him trembling, whimpering and screaming in his nightmares, apologising in a shamed voice that was no act, kissing me with a passion that was very real. And he had protected me before.

Something was off. But why was he lying to me still? Why did want to drive me away, to cast himself out of BERK and paint a huge target on his back.

Why did the man I loved have such a death wish?

I headed to our room and let myself in. It was still as we had left it the morning we had flown after the Terrors: our clothes on the chairs, cast aside as we had hastened into our flight suits. His side was messy, the pile of cables and computers, clothes strewn in a pile that needed sorting while mine was military neat: everything folded or stowed. With a huff, I searched through the things and gathered them for the transfer…and then I stared at his side.

And I snapped, staring at every item and seeing him there, that little dorky smile lifting his face and green eyes sparkling with a joke or tease. And I grabbed his things and threw them aside, screaming and raging against him, howling in my betrayal and misery and utter despair…until I grabbed the little framed picture, placed in a treasured position by the bed, the image of the little green-eyed russet-haired boy and his soon-to-be dead mother staring optimistically back at me.

I broke, collapsing to my knees, sobs shuddering through me and tears running down my face. My throat was suddenly clogged with misery as I clutched the picture to my chest, hugging it as I couldn't him, wishing I could have my dorky boyfriend back and despairing that all my love, all my hopes and dreams with him had been for naught because whatever plan he had insanely hatched, whatever damage BERK had done to him was too great to be overcome by whatever he felt for me. And that would cost us both our futures.

I would have to hunt him down and bring him back because it was my job as leader of the Dragon Riders. And I would see him sentenced to die in jail.

oOo

When he was taken back to Drago's complex, Hiccup was far more tense because the Grimborns had let him go alone, though he could feel the accusation in their dark eyes. Toothless was safely caged back in their Base at Veidimadurninnfloi and he was crooning and depressed that he was confined to the cage and denied flight…and Hiccup had no clue how he could persuade the brothers to let him exercise his dragon. The only option was probably to use Drago's arena…but that would put both Hiccup and Toothless within Drago's covetous grasp and he was certain that Viggo would never buy that.

Every nerve was taut with anxiety as he was conducted through the base directly to the cages and the little Night Fury. Myrkr was as playful and trusting as Toothless had been as a hatchling, bouncy like a puppy, affectionate and intelligent, learning rapidly that Hiccup was a kind and gentle friend while the grey-clad guards were cold and cruel, kicking at the little dragon if it came too close. The first time he saw it, Hiccup had lost it, lurching forward and shoving the guards away from the cowering dragon…and the guards had responded without hesitation, shoving him
back, punching him to the ground and showering him with kicks and punches until a roar had them backing away.

Breathing hard, body screaming protests at the abuse he had endured, he stirred, trying to uncoil, but a strong hand helped him up and supported him as he limped unevenly to the side, the little dragon crooning at his legs. Leaning painfully, he peered at his rescuer...then recoiled, stumbling back as Drago leered at him. His head cleared in a horrible instant and he cringed. A nasty smile lifted Bludvist's scarred face as his hand pulled away from the lean shape.

"Why?" he asked in a gruff voice. Hiccup gestured vaguely at the small dragon.

"They were kicking her," he murmured but Drago's face creased into an impatient glare.

"The animal must be disciplined to learn," he growled, his tone sending a shiver down Hiccup's spine but the young Rider lifted his head.

"Dragons respond best to trust," he argued.

"And they also learn from fear!" Drago roared, his entire face twisting in rage, his hand swinging round and catching the young Rider hard across the cheek. The sound of the slap was still reverberating through the arena as he swung again-and Hiccup caught the thick wrist with difficulty.

"But I'm a slow learner," he said through his teeth. "Tell your men to back off when I'm training...or you can train your own damned Night Fury!" With a roar, Drago lunged forward, his hand closing around Hiccup's slender throat and his eyes widened in shock as the pressure increased.

"You swore a DEAL!" Drago shouted in his face and he flattened his body back against the stone wall of the arena. The little Night Fury was cowering behind him, whimpering and he felt his legs tremble. This was the man who ordered the murder of a young mother and her three year old son without a second thought, the man who wouldn't hesitate to use violence against Hiccup and Toothless...

"I...I understand..." he choked. "I-I'm s-sorry..." Drago glared at him for a second more...then released him, allowing him to collapse forward and rub his throat, now marked with scarlet fingerprints.

"Learn your place!" Drago snarled and he stillled, anticipating another slap. With one final dark glare, Drago turned away. "That's enough for today. You have other duties..." Wincing and stumbling, the young Rider gently shooed Myrkr to her cage and gently stroked her goodbye, savouring her little purr of happiness before following Drago. The man was taciturn and set a fast pace, making Hiccup trot to keep up, the uneven limp his prosthesis caused making him stumble on the smooth floor. The complex was a warren, several passages leading from each node to the various other areas in the sprawl. For the tycoon, money was no object and with his guards and private airfield, personal geothermal power plant and harbour, the man essentially ran his own fiefdom in the rugged landscape. And as he had cut off every source of support, Hiccup had very effectively made sure he was alone.

After several minutes of silent walking, they arrived at another steel and glass door as Drago stomped in, the skinny shape behind him slowing as he glanced around, seeing glass walls to laboratories, each space housing scientists with eye-protectors and face-masks, their pale grey coveralls featureless. Abruptly, Drago stopped by a glass room like all the others-but this room contained a low bed, a trestle and metal chair and a young women sitting cross-legged on the bed, clothed in a set of pale get scrubs with hospital slippers. Her jet hair was braided over her shoulder
and her grey eyes narrowed as she saw the auburn-haired rider.

In an instant, she was up, racing towards the glass wall with a scream of rage, her fists pounding on the toughened glass, screaming a stream of obscenities. Drago stepped back and pace, his sallow face pulled in a cruel smirk.

"I see your lady friend is so grateful for your help," he scorned, then gestured with his hand. "Of course-go ahead and speak to her."

"Has she had the drug?" Hiccup asked quietly, his green gaze inspecting the raging shape.

"Every day since she was brought here, dragon rider," Bludvist confirmed. Nodding, he took a slow breath and then pressed his thumb against the lock, seeing the door slide open before he slid in. The door slammed closed behind him, leaving him trapped facing the scowling woman.

"Hello, Heather," he said.

She sprang for him, hands clawing at his face and he just managed to grab her wrists before she could get her claws into his face, though the impact slammed him back against the glass. "You bastard!" she snarled. "I might have known you were behind this. Are you planning to kill me like you killed my brothers?"

"I didn't kill your brothers!"

"Just one of them!" Heather spat at him. "You killed Dagur…"

"…who had abused and tortured me and was about to kill one of my team…"

"Yeah—that skanky bitch, Astrid!" she spat as Drago listened with a smirk. Hiccup pushed Heather back, his grip tightening on her wrists.

"Heather—the people you chose to work for—Alvin—were responsible for Ozzie's death," he reminded her in a low voice, still feeling the pain of the loss. No matter the truth, he still felt the guilt for the death, for Ozzie had been helping him uncovering the traitors in BERK—another cruel irony, considering his own current status—and he had been killed by Hiccup's own Uncle, Spitelout.

"If he had joined with us, he would still be alive," she accused him and his green gaze broke away from hers, recognising the truth. "But he insisted on staying with you. So you killed him, whether you pulled the trigger or not!"

"And that is why you are here," he told her in a low voice. "You were damaged by the Dragon-Root extract they gave you, Heather: the changes in your brain chemistry are proof that was the case. And your entire personality has changed since Alvin captured you. But no one was trying to help you: you were confined to a secure forensic psychiatric facility and the orders they were under were to never let you out. There was no attempt to cure you, to reverse the damage…they had condemned you to die there."

She eased the pressure, her grey eyes inspecting his pale features, reading determination in his face and his ashamed green eyes. "And you wanna be my hero?" she asked him sensuously, leaning towards him. He swallowed.

"I promised Ozzie I would always look out for you," he murmured, breathing hard. She lunged forward, lips crashing onto his, insistent pressure causing him to kiss her back, though his mind saw not grey but blue eyes…
"Have you ever considered I don't want my 'damage' reversed?" she breathed, pulling back an inch.

"You need it reversed, Heather, because it's destroying you," he said quietly. "The damage isn't just obvious…it's progressive. The destabilisation of your neurochemical systems will get worse…and unless we can interrupt the process, you will eventually die as a result." He took a slow breath. "I promised Ozzie would try to protect you. I promised him I would help get you better. I have to try…"

"And how can I trust you, Hiccup?" she hummed into his neck, her hand trailing down his chest and across his waist. "You turned me down before…" He took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes.

"Are you offering again?" he breathed. Heather nuzzled against his neck and her hand slid lower still.

"I could be…" she murmured. He looked into her eyes and took a shuddering breath.

"Take the meds, Heather," he murmured quietly. "And then we'll do whatever you want."

oOo

"Will…have there been any breaches in security, any attempts to come through the Firewall?" I asked the IT tech. The young man gave me a grim smile and shook his head.

"The problem is that he is so good, we may never know," he sighed. "Hiccup rebuilt the system after he joined Ozzie…and reformatted security after Spitelout was exposed. He is the man who knows this system better than anyone."

"And now he's a traitor with unprecedented access—even worse than Spitelout," I sighed. "Why does this keep happening to us?" Will glanced up and grinned.

"Maybe we need better vetting procedures?" he suggested.

"What-a question saying 'tick here if you are or ever will betray BERK'?" I asked.

"Hey, works for me!" Will grinned. I sat down and swung thoughtfully in the chair, staring at the blank screen in front of me. Frowning, I logged in and opened the message he had left me, scanning the instructions and attachments he had included, until I reached the one I recalled from glancing at it last time he was in horrible trouble.

"Will—would that help our problem?" I asked, tapping the screen with my finger. Will winced at the sound, almost cooing over the touchscreen but his eyes widened as he saw what Hiccup had sent me: a new Firewall and protection algorithm. And I smiled at the message.

"In case I am captured, Milady—this is far too complicated for even me to get through. This should keep you safe. And advise Will and the team to activate Protocol Ragnarok. Love you—HHHHIII."

"I knew he was working on something like this," Will admitted, opening the file and gaping at the data and complexity. "Damn, he was a brilliant programmer."

"He still is—and he's out there," I reminded him. "Can you install this?" He nodded. "What is Ragnarok?"

"The end of the world," he admitted. "If he tries to breach the system, it annihilates the hostile system. If he tries to penetrate us with Ragnarok engaged…game over." I stared at the little
message, the painful reminder of happier times—and my face hardened.

"Do it," I said. "I will inform the General and Gobber. Get those up and running. And Will…?" He looked up. "Find him. Get those trackers on line. I want to know where he is, every second of the day!"

oOo

It would scarcely be possible to feel worse, Hiccup thought as he sat at Drago's desk. Drago was standing behind him, his cruel dark eyes sweeping over the keyboard, watching Hiccup like a hawk. The man also had his hand lightly resting on his shoulder and the tension in Hiccup's lean body was so great his shoulders were literally hurting—but the implicit threat from the man was worse. Drago was currently tolerating Hiccup as an ally—or was it an asset? But he had already learned the man's treatment of allies was almost as poor as that of his enemies.

Thankfully, Heather had lost interest fairly rapidly once she had got his acquiescence because the fun had been in stealing another woman's partner—but when it was obvious that he was free and game, she had merely left him painfully aroused and flounced off. He had seen her take the tablets, for which he was grateful, but Drago's knowing and menacing looks only added to his marked discomfort. Well, that and the developing bruises from the kicking the guard had given him.

"I want…BERK…" Drago insisted.

"Yeah, yeah, join the queue," Hiccup had sighed under his breath. The grip tightened ferociously and he realised that Drago had heard his sarcastic reply.

"I am disappointed in your attitude," Bludvist menaced him gruffly. "I will see if Ryker can alter that. After all, you are my employee—even if you imagine yourself freelance." Hiccup stilled, then forced himself to lazily tap in a command. The BERK system waited.

"I think Ryker will do what Viggo commands—and they have given me their protection," he said as calmly as he could manage. "You want my skills, Drago. My attitude is my own business." And he even managed not to groan at the crushing pressure in his shoulder—and then Drago let him go.

"Prove it," he said calmly. "Destroy BERK." Hiccup quietly interrogated the computer, his eyes focussing on the screen and probing the edges of the system. He hoped that his team would have modified the system and locked him out—which they had—and when he probed the firewall gently, he recognised the configuration of the new programme he had developed and sent to Astrid. He paused, grateful that Astrid was…Astrid. And then he paused: he knew what he had said to Astrid and he knew she would trust him. He smiled: he had left a back door even in the new Firewall…and that was his way in…

"They've revoked my codes," he tried, craning his neck to look up at the brooding shape of Drago. "And modified the firewall. I…I can't…" Bludvist growled.

"Viggo said you were the man who built the BERK system," he threatened. "Maybe you don't understand what I am asking. I want to tear down the system…and if you can't do it, then something has to suffer." Hiccup stiffened. "You seem fond of the baby Night Fury. It would be a shame if she were to lose…a wing…" The young Rider stared up in shock and horror at him.

"You wouldn't…" he whispered. "She's unique…"

"ALL I NEED HER FOR IS BREEDING!" Drago roared and Hiccup flinched, his heart aching at the image of the playful young dragon maimed as a punishment for his failure. How had he left
himself open to this? How had he allowed Drago to get such leverage? But he knew. "And your
dragon will be her mate."

"You harm me and he'll never fly…" Hiccup managed faintly, horrified at the ruthlessness of the
man.

"All I need him for is to breed!" Drago growled. "Cross me, boy, and you'll find the Grimborns
always choose blood and profit over all else. They will give me your precious Night Fury the
moment I ask them for his services. And once there are young, I can dispose of the parents-and
Heather will train my dragons…"

And then Hiccup's plan came crashing down. Drago had him exactly where he wanted and he had
even handed the monster a psychopathic trainer who would do anything to harm BERK. Myrkr's
cute and trusting little face flashed across his mind, superimposed over Astrid's and he closed his
eyes.

"I'm waiting," Drago menaced. Hiccup closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured and hit the key.
Forty-Eight: Unacceptable compromises

The screen blanked…and then a few lines of code began to crawl across the screen…and the BERK symbol appeared. Drago gave a deep chuckle of triumph and prowled across the floor, inspecting the display on his wall of screens.

"Take me to the list of dragons and personnel," he demanded and Hiccup silently began to type, his fingers dancing across the keyboards, quietly opening a second window and entering data into the file that he needed to get through, cutting and pasting all the intel he had accrued so far. He stared at the screen for a long time. He had found his back door and knew he could wreck the system, could betray the other Riders and the dragons…

Images and biographies began to flash up…

GENERAL STOICK HADDOCK…

Drago was laughing at his victory over his foe, using the man's own treacherous son to bring him down…and Hiccup cringed inwardly at the thought. Not because he was close to his father—because the General had made that very clear—but because it had been Stoick's own stupidities and blindness that had endangered BERK.

COLONEL CRAIG 'GOBBER' GORDON…

The only face he recalled with any affection from his childhood after his Mom died, the big face smiling kindly at the lonely and ignored boy…the helping hand when he had been beaten up…the risk he took in getting him away from Security when Spitelout was torturing him… He blinked and felt sick with shame.

SERGEANT SNOTLOUT JORGENSEN…DRAGON: MONSTROUS NIGHTMARE (M)- 'HOOKFANG'…

Drago was spitting commands as Hiccup quietly extracted what he needed from his system while skirting the security triggers. He guessed that Astrid, Gobber and Grimsdaal would have bolstered the system and activated every protection they had—because they knew how dangerous he could be.

They had underestimated him. They all had.

CORPORAL ERET ERETSÖN…DRAGON: RUMBLEHORN (M)- 'SKULLCRUSHER'…

He closed his file and password protected it, then sent it to the familiar address he automatically sent all his sensitive documents to…knowing and hoping the recipient would guess the password…he used it enough. He stared at the screen and his breath stopped.

LIEUTENANT (DR) ASTRID HELENA HOFFERSON RAMC….DRAGON: DEADLY NADDER (F)- 'STORMFLY'…

"I'm sorry," he murmured again, staring for a long moment at the familiar and very serious face before he made his choice. He typed furiously, found the trigger…and slapped the ENTER button. There was an acknowledgement that the message had been sent…before the screen flickered and went black. There was a pause—then all Drago's screens blanked. Alarms started to sound and
Drago looked round, his cruel face suddenly shocked. The hum of the air-conditioning faded as his computerised energy management systems failed. The sounds of locks slamming to their failsafe-locked-modes resounded through the complex and Drago turned to see the young Rider sit back in his chair, staring blankly at the black screen.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" he roared.

"They have installed a system I knew nothing about," Hiccup lied quietly, recognising the Ragnarok Protocol. It would wipe Drago's systems, masking the data he had stolen and erasing records of the message he had sent out. "It was triggered when my unauthorised access to the dragon data was recognised…"

He flinched as Drago roared at him. "I told you there would be a price!" he shouted, lurching to the coms and Hiccup leapt up, lunging at the huge man, grabbing the man's powerful hand in both of his.

"No!" the young Rider shouted, his ashen face twisted with the effort. His forest green eyes glittered with desperation, staring deep into Drago's dead, black gaze as the man still reached forward despite his best efforts. "You can't maim her! Night Furies are the most accomplished fliers of all dragons…it would be too cruel to deprive her of flight…"

"And that will be your fault, won't it?" Drago taunted him bluntly. "Your failure cost her the ability to fly! I told you I don't tolerate failure…"

"No!" Hiccup shouted, clawing for a shred of hope. He put all his weight into preventing Drago from reaching the com to call through to the arena. "NO! They-they mate on the wing! If you cripple her, she'll never mate…and you'll never get your Night Fury army!"

"You're lying!" Drago sneered, his face twisted in a dismissive scoff. Hiccup stared up into his face, his own expression completely determined.

"Can you afford to take the chance?" he challenged Bludvist and the man's face filled with hatred, his hand closing into a meaty fist.

"You're lying…" he decided but Hiccup stood his ground.

"Check out the more damaged portions of 'Chronicles of Dragon's Edge'!" he argued. "I spent countless hours, using enhancing algorithms to augment the erased runes…" Drago's eyes widened in shock: his experts had dismissed the faded documents as worthless because of the accumulated damage of centuries—even though they only nestled a few miles away in the Icelandic Archives in Reykjavik. But this boy had managed to extract the lost data from the depths of time…

"If you show me, I will spare the Night Fury…" he breathed. Hiccup nodded urgently.

"As soon as your system is back up and running," he conceded and Drago's brows dipped into a furious scowl at the reminder of the failure. He lifted his fist above the young Rider.

"In the meantime…you can answer for your failure…" he growled and Hiccup steeled himself for the blow.

oOo

"He's in Akureyri, in Drago's complex," Will reported. "Over the time since he has been away from the team, this has been his path…" He flipped up a map, demonstrating the little red dots that represented his location.
"Could you make them green, please?" I murmured. "Favourite colour..." Wordlessly, Will complied: the tech staff all thought I would explode as well. "What's the location where he's spent most of the time?"

"Veidimadurinnfloi," Will read. " Hunters' Bay."

"The base of the Grimborns," I murmured. "Can you get satellite imagery on the submarine?" The images flickered and the grey vessel appeared, in much greater detail. Will murmured a few words to the two other members of the IT team with him and they immediately began to take images and make calculations. But my eye was drawn to a square warehouse-like building. It appeared to be camouflaged but also it looked like it was covered with asbestos: it was designed to be fireproof. "That building!" I said. "Can you get any thermal on that?"

"Coming up now," Viktor reported: he was a short man with nondescript brown hair, snub nose and wide grey eyes. The little warehouse suddenly lit up with a myriad of very warm shapes, blazing amid the cool blues of the ambient subzero temperature. I stared and then a slow smile lifted my lips.

"The dragons," I murmured. Viktor enhanced the image and the blobs coalesced into more recognisable shapes...including one I knew too well. I reached out and my fingers gently touched the screen, stroking the shape. "Toothless..." Then I straightened up and lifted the com to my lips. "Riders-report to Seminar Two. Fifteen minutes." Will stared up at me.

"What are you planning?" he asked me.

"Now we know where he is, we can plan to capture him," I began...and then alarms sounded. The IT crew all stared in horror.

"The system has been penetrated!" Will said urgently. "Firewall circumvented."

"Hiccup!" I hissed, seeing the screen flick over security systems, major systems...then personnel. I watched our faces flick up...and then I saw my own face flash by. God, I had a really stern look on. And then the system flashed with a red image of a Viking helmet and the words RAGNAROK PROTOCOL kept flashing.

"The system has protected itself," Will said with satisfaction. "The Protocol has kicked in to attack the invading system. That'll teach them."

But I frowned, peering at the screen. He must have known—he knew the system better than anyone. And anyone who could sidestep such an advanced Firewall and security systems would be far more careful and would not have triggered the Ragnarok Protocol—which he had written in the first place. Part of me was kicking my brain to tell it he had done it on purpose but the fact was he had already rummaged through our systems beforehand and that meant that he could just have activated the protocol as a ruse to hide the fact that he had already got what he was after. I rubbed my forehead tiredly. I didn't know what to think...beyond the cold fact that he had betrayed us and was currently hacking our system for Drago Bludvist. And no matter how you looked at it, that was treason.

oOo

Battered and weary, Hiccup was hauled down to the arena before he was taken to his car. Being trapped in the office with an enraged Drago had proven a painful and terrifying experience, bringing back those horrible memories from his kidnapping. Drago was just as powerful and cruel in real life and from the first moment, when the one-armed man had bodily thrown the lanky rider
the whole way across the office against the wall, to the end where he had just lain curled on the floor, beaten and shivering, it had been horrible. And now he was being marched like prisoner and he half-wondered if Drago would even let him go.

And then they thrust him into the arena and he heard the whimpers of the baby Night Fury. His head snapped up, eyes wide with horror and he broke away, racing to the cage to see the little grey dragon whimpering. One of her wings was broken and there were welts and cuts on her hide, her big green eyes filled with confusion and misery. "Myrkr!" he called, throwing himself against the bars. The little dragon whimpered and scrambled up, limping towards him. Hands grabbed him and hauled him away but he fought, breaking free and reaching through the bars, pressing his hand against the little warm muzzle, feeling the sad croon through the contact. Then he was dragged away again and fists met his body, crushing the air from him.

"I told you there would be consequences," Drago growled and Hiccup looked up blearily.

"You lied," he groaned.

"So did you, boy," he menaced. "You said you could get into BERK."

"I did," he murmured. "Never said they couldn't throw me out." Drago's fist tightened with an audible crack and Hiccup flinched. The tycoon noted the gesture with a cold smile and turned away.

"I'm sending you with the Grimborns to find my dragons," he growled. "But I warn you, boy—if there is any mistake in acquiring my dragons, this thing loses her wings and I will have whatever dragon mates her and accept what comes!" Hiccup swallowed, seeing the threat and making a silent promise that when he left, he would take the little Night Fury as well.

The ride back to the Base was silent and filled with anxiety…because he had done what Viggo had ordered him not to—and made an enemy of Drago. Not that Drago wasn't already his enemy…but the man now had some very real reasons to mistrust Hiccup and an equally real hold over the rider. He stared over the bleak volcanic landscape, black rocks whizzing by as the SUV sped along the excellent tarmac road and his eyes unfocussed. They would be heading north for the nest, aiming to get the eggs and hatchlings—if any—before they were located by the local authorities and removed. Hiccup guessed that no amount of bribes to Minister Ulmarsov would be enough to conceal the appearance of dragons on Russian territory.

As soon as the SUV stopped, Ryker wrenched the door open and bodily hauled Hiccup from the vehicle, throwing back a couple of steps that he stumbled unsteadily. "You had to anger him!" he growled.

"We knew there was a high likelihood that they would modify the system against me," he said quickly. "I got hit by a programme they've installed for that purpose…"

"And crashed Bludvist's system!" Viggo noted dryly. "I really expected more of you!" Backing up a pace, Hiccup sighed.

"You have my dragon and Drago has another Night Fury…" he reported. "The man has no clue how to manage dragons except through violence. He will mutilate her just to make a point!" Viggo cocked an eyebrow.

"He can do what he chooses with them—once he's paid us," he said calmly and Ryker gave a low chuckle at Hiccup's appalled expression.
"Did you imagine we cared what happened to them once they're delivered?" he scoffed and Hiccup's angry expression was eloquent enough. Viggo draped an arm round the skinny shoulders and the young Rider stiffened.

"Ryker—our young protege has arrived here from a different standpoint," he reminded his older brother smoothly. "He needs to learn…to be educated in the ways of the Hunter." Hiccup sighed.

"Yeah…about that…" he began but Viggo beckoned to his brother.

"Time for his first lesson," he announced and steered Hiccup away, deeper into the base. Ryker unfolded his arms and followed with a cruel smirk: he knew his brother's lessons were always amusing to watch…

oOo

"So we're going after Hiccup? Captain Dork? The fastest rider on the planet?" Ruff asked, her tone cynical. "How?"

"His tracker," I explained, staring at my team. My team…except it wasn't. This was Hiccup's team, the team he had led, albeit with some reluctance and resistance by the Riders, since he bonded with Toothless. And though the Riders had been utter bastards to him throughout most of that time, they had started to appreciate and respect him…and now morale was rock bottom because of his betrayal.

"He has a tracker?" Tuff asked. "Do I have a tracker?"

"Are you always getting kidnapped and captured?" I asked him pointedly. He opened his mouth to answer, caught my expression and subsided.

"When did he get a tracker?" Snotlout asked suspiciously, wondering if he had been tagged during his routine medical. I couldn't help it: I sniggered at his anxious expression.

"I injected him before the Conference," I explained. "He wanted it so he could be tracked. We'd already been kidnapped by Drago's men and he knew from your reports how hard it had been to find us. I think he just wanted to prepare against that eventually."

"But if we…"

"I have one as well," I announced calmly. "If Hiccup was getting one, so was I. I think he appreciated that I wanted to support his decision." And then I sighed and shook my head.

"Look, L-T, I think we should all get trackers," Eret suggested calmly. "Look, his reasoning was very sound—and anything could happen to any one of us. Not just hostile actions but crashes, adverse weather, dragon accident…"

"Going to the pub and getting drunk…"

"Thank you, Tuff!"

"Always happy to help!" he grinned, missing the sarcasm.

"I'm in," Cami sighed. Fishlegs nodded happily.

"At least we'll be like the dragons now…" he piped up. There was the sound of eight heads turning to stare at him. "What? They've all been tagged since Toothless was recaptured!"
"I knew there was something wrong with Hookie!"

"No, you didn't!" Cami pointed out.

"Why didn't the General tell us?"

"Because the place was rife with traitors!" I cut in, exasperated. "Didn't want to advertise so they wouldn't look for the trackers and try to disarm them…" Turning away, I clicked the remote and the screen behind me filled with a hugely magnified map of eastern Iceland. There were trails of green dots over the map. "This shows where Hiccup's tracker is. This bay is Veidimadurinnflo, 'Hunters' Bay'-the Base of operations of the Grimborns…" I clicked again and mug shots of Viggo and Ryker appeared.

"Ryker Grimbornnger, much more violent, the enforcer and devoted to…" Click. "Viggo Grimborn-younger brother but definitely the leader. Also sadistic and brutal…but a great tactician and very calculating. Certified Grand Master at Chess and wanted for four murders. His brother is wanted for twenty. They collect dragons for…" Click. Everyone gasped and Tuff whistled.

"Whoa. Ugly dude!" he murmured.

An enlarged head of Drago Bludvist appeared, dead shark-like eyes staring out over his hook nose and scarred, sallow face. "Drago Bludvist, owner of Bludvist Enterprises. Tycoon, owns a huge estate in Akureyri with private airport, geothermal power plant and private army. He lent the Icelandic Government billions of dollars after the financial crash and they seem to allow him to do whatever he wants. Ties to many Nordic luminaries-artists, writers and scientists as well as politicians-and appears to have Russian Minister Grigori Ulmarsov in his pocket. His legitimate concerns are in shipping, aeronautics and finance. Illegitimate are drugs, people trafficking and dragons. Do not underestimate."

"But he only has one arm!" Tuff protested.

"And that's one too many," Ruff added.

"Love the dreads…" I rolled my eyes and Snotlout sighed.

"And it looks like Hiccup has been splitting his time between the two," he said heavily. "I suppose that's proof he's working for them and not for us."

"That and the attack on our IT systems," Fishlegs added. Gustav sat up instantly.

"What? Nobody said he'd helped them attack us!" the youngest rider protested. "I thought it was all a mistake. I mean-this is Hiccup! He's like the most straightest decentest guy. Even when Dagur and Savage were being so horrible to him, he just took it!"

"Well, he's not taking it now…" Snotlout noted, folding his arms. "How do we take him down, boss?" I stared across the room and took a deep breath.

"We will all be armed with trank guns and you are ordered to shoot him and Toothless on sight!" I said ruthlessly. Going through everything during the briefing had just made me feel worse. "Twins, if you shoot one another or your dragon, we will leave you where you lie. Understand?"

"You're always picking on us," Ruff grumbled though she gave a nod of acknowledgement that it was probably justified.

"She just doesn't appreciate our Loki-given talents…" Tuff added, kicking the chair in front of him
like a sulky child.

"Bucket, Mulch, Eret, Cami—remain in the vicinity of the Base in case he gets past us!" I ordered. "He is not—I repeat NOT—to get inside. Snotlout, Gustav, twins—with me. We will head out to intercept when we have a definite location…Will?"

"Lieutenant? We have movement," the IT tech reported. "The submarine has submerged and Hiccup's tracker and Toothless's remaining trackers were both on it. The course is east-northeast…straight for Zvitoya. I think they're going for the nest!" Gustav was thumbing away at his com.

"Um…that's about 1500 miles from here!" he protested. "Fanghook's wings will fall off!"

"It's only 800 miles to Akureyri," Snotlout replied. "Can't we just go there and wait…?"

"What—fly up to the door and as if we can wait to ambush them when they get back?" Cami asked sarcastically. "And ask them if they would be nice enough not to shoot us and steal our dragons?"

"IT will tell us when they are in a stable location and them we can execute," I said. "Everyone—maintain readiness. Make sure the dragons are fed and rested. I will go and discuss with the General to see if there is anything else he can do."

But I knew…because Stoick was furious and had promised that when his son was caught, he would die in jail.

oOo

It was a relief be back on the submarine—because then at least Hiccup could visit Toothless as much as he wanted—though the dragon was also denied flight and very grumpy. The guard stood back and let him drop to his knees, his arms stretching out to caress the blunt muzzle. The dragon wasn't muzzled but Toothless was miserable and hated the cage.

"Sorry, bud," Hiccup sighed, his hands splayed on the warm scales. His own gaze locked on the big acid-green eyes and there was terrible shame in his eyes. "I did this. I should've waited, I should've been stronger…and though I'm not sorry to have left Dad behind…I don't think this has been any better for you, has it, buddy?" Toothless gave a small croon. "I know," Hiccup sighed, sitting against the bars, his head resting back as Toothless leaned against him. "At least at BERK, we could go flying every day…but here…I don't think they'll ever let you go. Or me…"

Toothless solemnly licked him, the sticky saliva dripping off his cheek and making his hair stand up crazily. Wearily, he slid down to the floor and curled against the bars. "I'm here, buddy," he murmured tiredly. "The Grimborns are really…hard to please…" he added, shifting his bruised shape. Today had been far harder than any day other than a Dagur day and he felt his body yearn for the feel of a warm body against his, of gentle arms encircling him and making him feel safe. He screwed his eyes closed and felt Toothless press hard against the bars, his warmth seeping into Hiccup's aching shape. "I think I'm safer with you, bud," he murmured and fell asleep.

The journey was over a day in length, 1500 miles to the far north, past Svalbard and over to Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa, deep into Russian Territory. Hiccup could sense the tension as they headed into the Barents Sea and closed on the remote islands. Viggo had insisted that Hiccup spend more time with the brothers and they had spent the time barraging him with questions, statements and scorn, rubbing his qualms and promoting their own ideology. Exhausted, isolated and afraid, he had finally nodded in resignation, not believing their words but trying to get them to shut up. Ryder had wanted to reinforce the words physically but Viggo had inspected the bowed shape and waved him back. He didn't want to break or scare off Hiccup too soon.

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He had explored the ship and found all the access and side passageways as well as the pens…and had found that Smidvarg and the gang had been brought along, presumably because the Grimborns suspected there could be Night Terrors in the nest. Toothless suddenly looked up and crooned as they surfaced and moored…and the dragon knew he would finally get out.

Hiccup had been forced to watch as Toothless's tail assembly had been removed and then they were rowed across to the island, landing on a dry, gritty beach and squinting against the scouring icy wind that seemed to have come direct from the pole. The Grimborns and their men were warmly wrapped in arctic gear while Hiccup just had his flight suit, zipped right up tot he neck, his hands and face freezing and his warm dragon standing beside him.

"Find the dragons," he ordered and Hiccup sighed, turning to the Night Fury.

"Where are they, boy?" he murmured. Toothless crooned and glanced back at the sleek submarine but Hiccup shook his head. "On the island?" he asked and Toothless grumbled, then began to bounce, then scampered off. Hiccup sighed: seeing a twenty-six foot dragon caper like a puppy was cute but Ryker's expression threatened another unpleasant few minutes if Toothless didn't comply. Swiftly, he stumbled after his friend and the Hunters tramped after them.

They walked for almost an hour over uneven and rising rocky terrain, heading for a massive dark outcrop jutting against the snowy sky. Toothless was getting more and more excited as they closed and as Hiccup faltered, he finally whistled and clambered onto Toothless's neck, riding his dragon up the slope. Ryder sneered but Viggo watched them thoughtfully, seeing the obvious affection between the two, and recalling Drago's angry communication. It was obvious that Hiccup loved dragons and would risk himself recklessly for them…even betraying his family to keep his dragon safe. And that self-sacrifice made him very vulnerable to manipulation. And then they reached the cave.

Ryker shoved Hiccup aside, the lean shape stumbling and leaning hard on the Night Fury as they entered the wide, cold cave, the scent of ice and must obvious. And then there was the skrittering, the sounds of leather wings and the chirp of alien creatures…and glowing eyes.

"Bud?" Hiccup murmured and Toothless gave a little bark, then gave his special echolocation roar, his ear-flaps twitching as he scanned the empty space. Then Toothless suddenly engaged Alpha mode, the blue glow lighting his wings and mouth and the spines running all down his back and tail. He roared…

…and roars returned in answer, followed by the flapping of wings…and a whole flock of Night Terrors flapped into view, every single one of them black. They were all looking anxious and Hiccup realised they needed their alpha-Smidvarg-to protect and control them. He walked forward, quietly shushing them and Toothless eventually managed to get them to perch on the walls by the entrance. Viggo made a note on his tablet while Ryker motioned the catchers to cover their escape with nets and tranquillisers. Hiccup stared at them and realised that almost all the guards were gone…and so were Viggo and Ryker. He glanced deeper into the cave and pointed.

"There, bud!" he ordered and the Night Fury fired a plasma blast, having all the men snap to cover them with their guns. Hiccup stiffened, but then he gestured to the rock Toothless had blasted, which was glowing brightly and illuminating the cave. Viggo glared at him for a long moment, before waving the men to lower their weapons before striding past the young rider, his eyes fixed on the huge cache of dragon eggs lying piled by their dozens, half-buried under a rockfall. The scattered shells of the hatched Night Terrors crunched underfoot as Ryker advanced, taking the time to grab Hiccup's shoulder…and slap him-hard-across the face. He gritted his teeth, taking a deep breath before following after the big man.
Toothless gave a low growl and Hiccup patted him. "Yeah, I know," he muttered quietly. "Not what I signed up for either."

The Hunters began to catalogue the eggs, using a chart to score what was available in the cache. A small Monstrous Nightmare, two Nadder hatchlings and a dead baby Scauldron were all found at the back of the cave and Hiccup quietly helped them wrangle the baby dragons into small cages, forcing himself not to cringe at the terrified whimpers. Toothless had to fire twice more to re-energise the glowing rock and the guards had stopped reacting. And then Viggo tapped the tablet and gave a low chuckle.

"Not so rare after all," he murmured, gesturing to a smooth black egg. Hiccup stared, his forest green gaze widening, Toothless was sniffing the egg and crooning wildly, a purr vibrating through him.

"Another Night Fury egg?" Hiccup breathed and Ryker gave a scornful laugh.

"That will solve a lot of problems," he said cruelly. "When it hatches, Drago can either get rid of that damaged female he has-or replace your damaged specimen…"

_The egg will mean Drago kills Myrkr or Toothless_, Hiccup realised. He glanced at Toothless and caressed the egg gently: it was stone cold and showed no imminent signs of hatching. And he knew now where the egg needed to be, the only place it would be safe…

…the only place he would definitely not be. He snapped his head round to the Night Fury. "Now, bud!" he said and Toothless gave a small roar. In an instant, the Night Terrors were in the air, screeching and diving back and forth, attacking everyone except him. He lunged forward, snatching the egg and leaping onto Toothless. The dragon fired, this time the blast slamming the guards unconscious. Viggo turned-to be hit full in the face by Toothless's tail. As he was spinning, unconscious, to the ground, Toothless was firing at Ryker and slamming him back against the wall.

They raced to the entrance, releasing the young dragons. They looked hopefully at him and he nodded, then leapt onto Toothless and encouraging the dragon to gallop back to the submarine, the little dragons flittering alongside. Though he was the fastest in the air, Toothless was pretty much the fastest dragon on the ground as well and he slammed through the hold doors, racing to the cages. Hiccup scrambled up and wrenched them open, letting the Night Terrors out. Smidvarg chirped and landed on Hiccup's shoulder as he leaned forward and retrieved Toothless's tail.

"I really think BERK is the best place for us all," he sighed, "On my mark, head back. Your family will be with you…" Smidvarg gave a weird little chatter and bounced up and down as the young rider expertly reattached the prosthetic tail and clambered aboard. "Okay-let's go!" he said…as the guards arrived. Toothless growled…but Smidvarg and the gang dive-bombed them and Toothless swatted them aside before they ran to the hold door.

The Night Fury gave a loud roar as he spread his wings after so many unfair days of being grounded…and launched into the air, spinning as the wings pumped furiously, driving them high into the cloudy sky, before they topped out and spun, arrowing down and blasting past the submarine, then arching back up and looping the loop. Unable to stop himself, Hiccup gave a scream of pure joy before they arched down…and this time, Toothless arrowed in and fired, destroying the radio antenna and holing the hull. Spinning round for one last time, the Night Fury arched up, Smidvarg and all the Night Terrors as well as the baby dragons following them.

Glancing over his shoulder, Hiccup saw the damaged submarine and the shapes emerging from the cave of the Hunters. Though a shiver of fear that he had broken his word to them and earned their implacable hatred, he felt safer than he had since his capture. Sure, his father was the worst father
ever and quite frankly, an appalling commander and human being…but the Grimborns were worse. He turned his attention back to the smaller dragons.

"Bud-tell them to head for BERK, for Scotland!" he shouted and Toothless immediately gave a few little warbles that all the dragons responded to. As they hovered, the flock peeled away and headed towards Norway while Hiccup patted his dragon's head. "Not yet, bud," he murmured. "We gotta get to Iceland before Viggo can mend his coms. We need to get Myrkr and Heather out of there before Drago realises what I've done!" His hands tightened on the saddle and he leaned forward, feeling the steady flap of the wings as they hovered.

"Okay, bud-let's see how fast you can go. Give me everything you've got!"
Forty-Nine: The Crowned Dragon

Hiccup had never felt so cold. Even though he was pressed hard against Toothless and was as low as he could be over the Night Fury's neck, he had lost sensation in his hands some time ago and his face was so cold it was stinging as if Ryker had slapped him a dozen times. Toothless was flying fast and direct, his body streamlined as his huge wings flapped, flying them close to the sea at almost top speed. After being cooped up for so long, the Night Fury was full of energy and he was enjoying the rapid flight, but Hiccup was too anxious, strained and exhausted to properly savour the experience. He buried his freezing face into Toothless's warm neck, feeling the play of muscles as the great wings pumped away. Toothless felt him hunker down and gave a low rumble.

"I know, bud," he murmured into the dragon’s neck. "It's a lot to ask…but if anyone can make a thousand mile trip towards the man I've been trying to avoid like mad before the Grimborns can warn him, it's you."

Toothless humphed. Hiccup slowly raised his face, feeling the icy wind hit like another slap.

"And there's someone you oughtta meet," he murmured softly. "All the books said your kind were very rare-almost extinct…but you gotta meet Myrkr…she's a female Night Fury…and Drago has her…"

There was an interested croon.

"She's kinda cute," he admitted, resting his head against the warm scales again, the wind racing over his back. "And I think you'll like her, bud…" Another croon. "No, you're my best friend, bud. In fact, after this, you may be my only friend…"

Toothless warbled sadly.

"No, I'm pretty sure Astrid is after my guts," Hiccup sighed. "And my Dad…well, I suspect he'll shoot me on sight…" Another warble. "But at least I have you…" Toothless crooned and craned his neck to try to look back at his rider. "C'mon, bud…let's get this over with," Hiccup murmured as they accelerated over the water, then allowed a brief smile to warm his face. "Our destiny awaits."

"Where?"

"Exactly where we thought, Lieutenant," Will explained to me. "Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa-Franz Josef Land…"

"What do the trackers show?" I asked, leaning forward to peer at the screen myself.

"Hiccup, Toothless and the Night Terrors are all there," the young tech reported, tapping the screen with his pen. "The Terrors are now crossing northern Norway while Toothless and Hiccup are heading directly back towards Akureyri…"
"And their new BFF, Drago," I snarked, feeling guilty as I said the words, especially as he cast me a sideways look. "I'm sorry, Will. I know he was your boss—but he's thrown his lot in with the Grimborns and we know he's spent a fair amount of time in Drago's complex…"

"His estimated ground speed is in excess of four hundred miles an hour…wait, that can't be right…" he murmured and then I smiled.

"He's on Toothless, the fastest dragon in the world," I murmured, a little nostalgic grin lifting my lips—and then I reminded myself that it was done. "Tell me when he arrives and get me satellite imagery of Drago's complex." I straightened up. "Now what is so damned important you have to fly a thousand miles to get back to Drago, Hiccup?" I murmured.

They had slowed as they approached the coast of Iceland—though slow was a relative term, for they only dropped to a mere hundred miles an hour as they crossed the coastline and began to skim low over the rugged volcanic landscape. Hiccup peered through narrowed eyes, dinking and banking as they swerved through the hills, lava flows and gulleys, using the geography to shield their approach to Bludvist's complex. Finally, they landed unheralded on the drive, just before the main door and Hiccup walked up confidently, a smile on his features.

"I'm here for training," he announced calmly. "I've brought my dragon to help teach the young one…" The guard scowled under his visored helmet but he had standing orders to admit the boy. With a brusque motion, he gestured the boy to entered and Hiccup walked by with forced calm, gesturing to Toothless, who strolled past the armed man with a low growl in his throat. "Toothless! Play nice…" Hiccup murmured, holding out his hand. The Night Fury grumbled and walked forward so his head pressed up into the outstretched palm. "Easy, bud." Then he raised his wide forest green eyes and offered an apologetic smile to the guard. "I don't know what's got into him," he sighed. "He's usually so good with new people…"

The guard backed up a pace, seeing the flicking tail and motioned the young Rider on. With an apologetic shrug, Hiccup walked on, still talking quietly to the dragon as they headed down the familiar route to the arena. He guessed the guard would tip off Drago and he would have a limited window to do what he needed. As soon as they were out of sight, he paused, then ducked into an office he had noted before, sliding into a seat and access the system using the code he had memorised from Drago's office. Toothless crowded into the room, his big shape making the room cramped. Hiccup cast him a slightly grumpy look as he was jostled by the eager Night Fury: after being separated from his Rider for so long, Toothless was very loath to let Hiccup out of his sight, even for a second.

After a second, the screen blanked…then displayed the crowned dragon symbol of Bludvist's organisation. With an audible sigh, Hiccup rapidly navigated the system and sought out the full list of dragons…then downloaded it to his com. And then he stared at the com…then at Toothless. With a frown, he tapped in a query and pulled up Drago's intelligence about the trackers and realised that the man's organisation had studied the dragons—especially those that Alvin had captured. He was able to lock onto the dragon trackers…and Toothless. He looked into the big green eyes and sighed, then covertly accessed his own personal emails and pulled up the schematics for the trackers…including the command frequencies. He sighed, then locked onto Toothless's remaining trackers and deactivated them. He then turned to the Night Terrors and freed Smidvarg and the gang from being followed—and this recaptured—by Drago and the Grimborns. He checked the system and confirmed they didn't know he was tracked as well, his slightly different frequency protecting him. He paused, his finger hovering over the key…and then he cancelled the request. His tracker would remain on…so that Astrid would know where he was.
After quickly checking Heather's data, he logged off and rose, crackling his neck. A long flight followed by hunching over a screen had made him very stiff and he found himself missing his bed back in BERK and sleeping secure in Astrid's arms. He blinked: security had been in very short supply in his life and he had thrown his away. Grimacing, he headed for the door and they walked swiftly towards the arena. Again, he was admitted without hesitation and he almost ran to the cage where Myrkr was locked up, his forest green eyes worriedly searching the dark space. For a long moment, his heart froze and he feared that Drago had already killed her but finally, he saw a little shape hunched in the corner.

"Myrkr," he breathed. "Gods, I am so sorry…" He forgot the beating Drago had given him because he had probably deserved it for his duplicity…but the dragon hadn't. Yet she lifted her head, luminous green eyes spying his lean shape, his hands tight on the bars and face stricken with guilt and she clambered painfully to her feet. Her broken wing was half-folded over her back and her slate-grey hide was marked with fresh wounds but she limped to the bars and crooned, pressing her face into Hiccup's outstretched hand. Then Hiccup snapped his head round. "Key!" he snapped. "Let her out!" The guard smirked and shook his head.

"Bludvist's orders," he growled. "The little monster stays in its pen." Hiccup's eyes narrowed and he glanced at Toothless.

"Little monster?" he murmured. "What d'you think, bud?" The Night Fury growled and spun, his tail swiping the man sideways, knocking him senseless. Then the dragon gave his toothless grin as Hiccup spun and dashed to the guard, fumbling with the security key-card and swiping to open the cage. As the door swung open, the little dragon raced out, landing hard on Hiccup and licking him thoroughly. A smile lit his face and he stroked the battered little Night Fury in relief. "Good to see you too, missy. And you know that doesn't wash out, don't you?"

And then she stiffened as Toothless moved closer, his eyes wide and curious as he sniffed the little female and his pupils dilated widely, giving a little croon. He nudged her and Myrkr whimpered, half-cringing and pressing against Hiccup…but the larger Night Fury gave her a gentle rub and timidly, she returned it. Slowly, Hiccup sat up as the little dragon inched towards Toothless and the larger dragon solemnly licked her. She cooed in delight and nuzzled him as the young Rider stared at the key-card still in his hand…then starting rapidly running from cage to cage, unlocking the doors and freeing the dragons. He panted back to Toothless, who was warbling quietly to the little Night Fury and nudging her encouragingly.

"C'mon, bud…we gotta go," he said urgently. "And you too, missy." He held out his hand and Myrkr pressed her head against it again. He headed towards the door to the main complex, to the research section. "We have one more passenger to collect…" Toothless gave a huff and walked after him, swatting the guard-who was stirring—with his tail and knocking him out cold once more.

Now every sense was on edge because he was so close—and the rational part of his mind was screaming that he was being utterly suicidal and insane and should be flying away at this very moment. But instead, he sped down the corridor to the labs, using the stolen card to sneak in and duck down, past the offices until he reached the room he sought…and its inhabitant. He motioned and the dragons remained quietly concealed by the back door while he walked up to the glass door.

"Heather?" he murmured. She looked up, her eyes narrowing as she saw him and she rose slowly, her motions predatory.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me, Hiccup," she said sharply, tossing her jet hair over her shoulder. "And we were having so much fun…" She smirked at him and the light flush that warmed his pale cheeks, recalling the state she left him in. "Did you find someone to help you with
"Your...er...problem or did you handle it yourself?" Hiccup forced himself to give a steely stare at her and not flinch at the mime she was making. "Or maybe Drago...?" she murmured. "I can see he's got his eye on you..." And he couldn't help but stiffen and shudder. Her smile grew crueler... maybe because she was Dagur's sister and knew his buttons.

"I'm sure I'm a disappointment to him, as I am to everyone else," he forced himself to say lightly. "But you have your meds and I can offer you a way out..."

"To where?" she snapped back sharply. "Back to the military prison? Or the psychiatric hospital? Uh-huh. I may as well stay here..." He leaned forward, using the security pass to open the door and inviting her out.

"Wouldn't you rather be free, Heather?" he asked her directly. "I'm not taking you back to BERK. Hel, I can't go back there-I'll be arrested on sight...if not shot. But you deserve freedom...it wasn't your fault." She moved towards him and he steeled himself as she laid one hand on his face and the other trailed down his chest towards his waist.

"Maybe not," she murmured, leaning forward to breathe in his ear, her soft hair brushing his face. "But this is!" She spun, shoving him backwards, her leg lashing out and taking his normal leg from under him. He staggered and overbalanced backwards, unable to right himself on his prosthetic. Scrambling up as soon as he fell, he saw Heather slam the door to the glass room and stared at her as she gave a cold smile. "You were right-he came for me..."

"It was obvious he has some feelings for you, Heather," Drago growled, walking forward. Hiccup's eyes widened and he backed away, appalled. "But I see they are not reciprocated..."

"I prefer the...more powerful man," she purred, though her cool gaze remained locked mockingly on Hiccup. Breathing hard, he felt his stomach plummet to his boot and backed away further as Drago motioned his guards.

"Bring him to my office and he can explain what he has been doing with my access..." he growled. Despairing, Hiccup stared towards the door as they wrenched it open and though he dodged, they grabbed his arms and hauled him out. Drago grabbed his face, fingers digging hard into his cheek and dead black eyes inspecting his pale features. "You couldn't stay away, could you, boy? And I thought you were helping the Grimborns with my dragons!"

"Change of plan..." Hiccup mumbled, trying to pull away. Drago leaned closer.

"How did you get back?" he breathed. Hiccup stared back.

"Guess," he breathed back as Drago shoved him back.

"Search the complex! The Night Fury is HERE!" he roared and Hiccup felt himself dragged towards the door, casting a disappointed look at Heather, who was smirking, her arms folded. Drago turned to her. "And you...I think you will prove very useful to me, my dear," he said smoothly.

"I was thinking the same," she replied calmly. "Keep the meds coming, Drago Bludvist, and I'm all yours!" He nodded.

"I think Miss Oswaldson needs some fresh clothes and better lodgings," he ordered the guards. "She is to be given full access to her medications and the continued efforts of my medical team to achieve a more permanent solution to her condition." On hearing his words, she grinned and turned to face him, to Hiccup's horror.
"You know, I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship," she said as the young Rider was dragged away. Frantically, his forest green gaze darted round the lab and down the corridor, desperately seeking the black and smaller slate grey shapes of the two dragons…but Toothless had taken off and he hoped his dragon was smart enough to evade Drago's men…at least until he could come up with some plan… But his mind reminded stubbornly blank as he was hauled into the office and held helpless. Drago paced back and forth, his meaty fist clenching and unclenching. He nodded and a hand fisted Hiccup's hair, wrenching his head back and exposing his throat.

"What did you do to my computer, boy?" the tycoon growled. Hiccup tried to fashion a confident smile but felt as if he had probably failed.

"No need to get excited, Drago! I was trying to find a way to deactivate the trackers they put on the dragons in BERK!" he explained a little too swiftly. Drago turned back, his scarred face twisted in an interested expression.

"And did you?" he demanded. Hiccup gulped, feeling very exposed, his neck bobbing as the tug on his hair intensified.

"It was harder than I expected…the command pathway is encrypted and…"

Drago slapped him so hard he saw stars, tasting blood from the corner of his mouth. "Don't try to blind me with jargon, boy!" he sneered. "I understand the systems…and I know that a man who can scythe through the protections of BERK—which my men haven't got near-can deactivate the trackers. So why are you lying to me?" He slapped Hiccup again. Grimacing, the young man whimpered.

"I'm not lying!" he lied. "I-I couldn't find the right key pathway and I…"

SLAP! Hiccup felt his cheek was on fire from the third blow and he saw stars. Drago was a very powerful man, similar in size to his own father and he hit like a hammer.

"Access their system, boy!" he snarled. "I have been very reasonable, allowing you to live and visit my dragons…"

"You wanted my expertise in training them!" Hiccup said bitterly. "It was hardly a concession on your part…"

"…and I agreed to rescue and treat your friend, Heather…" Drago growled.

"Who has royally betrayed me and joined you," Hiccup replied bitterly. He was forced to sit down and his shoulders were held in place by bruising grips as Drago stood opposite him.

"What do you want me to do when I capture your dragon?" Drago breathed. "I can treat it well…or I can make it scream with pain. Your choice…" He leaned closer. "And the Grimborns said you were a damned coward, whimpering and whining at a few slaps…so there is so much more we can do to you, boy…" he threatened and Hiccup dipped his head, bitterly regretting every choice he had made…and wishing he had Astrid's fierce determination and temper. His fingers typed across the keyboard, skimming the edges of the BERK system…then he felt a knife rest against his neck, the cold edge biting into his skin. His green eyes widened, watching Drago smile cruelly, recalling what he had started all that time ago. Almost automatically and defiantly, he cut every link to BERK, bobby-trapping the route and simultaneously unlocked every door in the base.

"You're wrong," Hiccup said quietly, feeling the cold knife edge gently cut his skin, the memory flashing images and sensations he thought he had mastered. He swallowed. "You think this is
about power, about mastery…but dragons are amazing, kind, loyal creatures that will protect us, not destroy us…"

"NAIVE FOOL!" Drago roared, his fist crashing onto the table. "You will learn exactly what I can make dragons do, boy…and who they can be used to destroy…” Hiccup's green gaze flicked to the screen and his lips tilted in a small smile.

"But not today," he murmured as the door exploded inwards. Drago spun, his face twisting into a triumphant smirk.

"The Night Fury!" he hissed. "So you chose your side.." Hiccup swallowed as the knife bit deeper into his neck.

"His!" he spat as Toothless fired at Drago and slammed the man aside. The grips on his shoulders tightened and Hiccup steeled himself for the fatal blow…and then a small blast of bluish-gold plasma shot past his ear, singeing his hair. The pressure of the knife vanished as Myrkr bounded onto the desk, growling, her teeth bared as she leapt on the other guard while Toothless blasted everything else in the office to pieces. Drago cowered under the desk as Hiccup scrambled away and threw himself into the saddle, grabbing Myrkr on the way.

"STOP THEM!" Drago bellowed as they galloped down the corridor. Hiccup leaned low over Toothless, the squirming Myrkr in his arms.

"I'm sorry, bud…but you know what to do?" he asked. Toothless gave a little warble as they erupted into he arena, the dragons milling around, confused. Toothless growled and lifted his head to the bars and chains that made the roof-before blasting a huge hole in the barrier. He roared then leapt up, huge wings throwing them through the gap and into the subzero sky, Hiccup hanging on for dear life with the little Night Fury wriggling in his arms. "Right-call them…" he ordered and Toothless roared again.

Below him, every dragon lifted off the ground, wings beating and eyes locked on the alpha…they rapidly rose and erupted through the roof…and then another roar echoed through the complex and every dragon froze. In the lake behind the main building, a greyish shape rose, a crown of spines framing a face with pale blue eyes and flattened muzzle with a small pair of tusks, one from each cheek. The creature roared again and the escaping dragons paused, then every single one swung around to stare down at the strange dragon. Then, as one, they returned to the arena.

Hovering, Hiccup stared, his eyes wide with concern. Toothless was beginning to sink lower and Myrkr had stopped fidgeting. He kicked Toothless then slapped him on the back of the head. With a grumble, the black Night Fury shook his head, blinking. "Get us out of here!" Hiccup shouted as the chatter of machine gun fire began to erupt around them. "TOOTHLESS! Get us OUT of here!" Hiccup shouted more urgently and they arrowed up into the freezing sky. But as they rocketed away, the young Rider stole a final look back at the lake and the unknown dragon within…an alpha that seemed to serve Drago…and was a real threat to BERK.

oOo

The motion sensors alarmed in the glen and Sergeant Grimsdaal called Snotlout and I to view the surveillance footage. There was limited coverage of the whole glen-just the key points, but we were able to use the high cameras to pick out a lone man, walking slowly up the snowy glen, limping very slightly. He was tall, lean and lanky, limping slightly and favouring his left leg…and he was in a black, form-fitting flight suit.

"Hiccup," I breathed.
"No sign of the Night Fury," Grimsdaal reported.

"He has to be here," I growled. "He hardly walked here from Iceland…"

"So has he hidden Toothless or left him out of sight and walked into the glen?" Snotlout suggested. I glared at the screen.

"Only one way to find out," I snapped. Both men look at me. "And don't argue…I'm going. I'll take Cami and Ruff. Prepare the cells!" And I grabbed my gun. Snotlout winced.

"Er…lieutenant…please don't kill my cousin," he pleaded.

"That depends entirely on what he says…" I threatened and went to round up my chosen team. They were surprised I had chosen them but I felt I needed my friends with me as I faced him…because this was going to be very hard. We wrapped up and headed for the 'back door'-pedestrian access to the glen close to Pen Seven.

"Location?" I murmured into my com.

"Direct line for the back door," Will reported.

"His tracker is still working," Grimsdaal reported. "It reads as Hiccup Haddock." I grunted and led the girls out. I was the only one who was armed because I was pretty sure all of us could take him single-handed anyway-unarmed combat really wasn't his forte. And then we stood and waited, staring down the slope as the skinny shape limped up the slope. He looked dishevelled and bruised and was breathing hard from the walk but when he saw us, his lips lifted in a small smile and drew to a halt about five yards shy of our position.

"Afternoon, ladies!" he greeted us.

"AARGH!" Cami shouted and threw herself at him. Shocked, he was completely unprepared and she bore him to the snowy ground, his fists slamming hard into his face. Silently, he grabbed at her wrists and managed to throw her off-as Ruff kicked him hard in the side. He yelped and tried to squirm away…as she kicked again. He grabbed her foot and swept her legs away, dumping her on the snow. But Cami was up again, landing another blow. He tried to roll away but she threw a throat-lock on him, pulling him back. He tried to prise her off him but she was very efficient and extremely angry.

"THIS is for betraying us and especially Ast!" she hissed in his ear. I was half-shocked and half-grateful that they were beating him up for me…though I knew I ought to do my own dirty work. Ruff punched him again as he swung an elbow round and caught Cami in the ribs, breaking her hold-damn those self-defence lessons I gave him. But Ruff kicked him again and he landed on his face, trying to crawl away.

"And this is for betraying BERK!" Ruff growled.

"Astrid-please!" he begged. "I came here to surrender!"

"Sure you're not playing us, Hiccup?" I snapped. He stared at me, breathing hard.

"I swear on Toothless!" he said swiftly. "Please…" Ruff kicked him again. "OWW!"

"Okay, girls…let him get up…" I said, watching him carefully as he achingly got to his feet. They withdrew but were ready, fists bunched and eyes locked on him. He grimaced but then forced himself to smile. There was a cut in the side of his neck and there were older bruises under his
fresh wounds.

"Thanks, Milady!" he said.

I punched him hard in the face, watching him slam to the floor, grunting in pain. I know I can hit hard-and I really gave him everything. He rolled painfully onto his side, shaking his head and pressing the heel of his hand to his bloody lip.

"I…guess I deserved that," he said thickly, slowly clambering to his feet. I punched him again and watched him go down again. "Oww…" he whined, then looked up, his green eyes anxious. "Are you going to hit me again?" he asked warily.

"Yes."

"Then I may just stay down here, if it's all the same to you…" he said quietly.

"Actually, no," I said coldly. "Ruff, Cami…" They moved in on him and he waved his arms furiously.

"No, no! Getting up!" he said frantically and scrambled unsteadily up. I punched him again and he staggered back. "Has-has anyone told you that you hit really hard?" he asked hurriedly.

"WHY?" I demanded, my fist balled. "Why did you do it? Why join the Grimborns? Why betray me? Why betray BERK? Gods, Hiccup…I thought we…we were…and you said…you did…" He blinked, swinging his head to see the accusing glares from my companions. He turned back to me and his face was suddenly sad.

"I'm sorry," he said thickly, wiping his bloody mouth. His shoulders visibly slumped.

"Is that it?" I demanded. He gave a weary shrug.

"Sorry," he repeated, his forest green gaze unfathomable. "But that's all there is."

"Then there's nothing I can do if you won't talk to me!" I growled, drawing my weapon. I pointed the trank gun at his chest, heaving as he breathed hard in anxiety. "Hiccup Haddock—you are under arrest for treason!"

"I'm sorry, Astrid," he murmured. "I-I never meant to hurt you. It just turned out that way…" He shuddered as the first shot hit him. I knew being tranked was really painful-like being kicked in the chest by a mule, according to Gobber—but I felt no guilt as I pulled the trigger, over and over. His green eyes widened in pain and resignation at each breathtaking impact. But I kept on shooting him until he staggered back and sprawled on the snow, a black misshapen star, eyes closing as he finally passed out. Blinking back moisture that had to be due to the cold, I lifted the com to my lips.

"We got him."

Chapter End Notes

For those of you worried, the drug used in their 'trank guns' has a wide therapeutic index, meaning you can give a very high dose before you get toxicity eg coma or death. Seven shots is fine and won't kill the hero (but is still painful).
It's You or the General

Fifty: It's you or the General...

It had been a week and I still hadn't seen Hiccup. In fact, only the General and I hadn't been to visit him in the cells—probably because we both knew it would be ugly. Well, thinking about it, it was always ugly when Hiccup and his father spoke but this time, I guessed it would be uglier for us as well. And I wanted to put that off as long as possible.

The others had all been to see him, visiting him as he sat locked in his cell, constantly guarded by at least one member of Security and always on camera and I had reviewed every encounter along with Sergeant Grimsdaal, watching his reactions and listening to his words. The others had all been frustrated because all he would say was "sorry" and ask if I was coming. When they said no, he clammed up and I watched as each and every one gave him an absolute verbal pasting. Even I had winced at what they had said and what they called him...but he had simply bowed his head and taken it.

After the week, Snotlout sought me out. "Look, Astrid...Lieutenant... I don't want to make things difficult or upset you...but I really think you need to talk to him. He's not saying anything to anyone and we both know we have to find out what he betrayed and what damage we have to deal with." I stared at him silently: we knew I was probably the most damaged by this. The team had been walking on eggshells around me since his capture, as if they thought I would suddenly collapse into a weeping mess or transmute to a raging psychopath. I gave a small, humourless smile: I had shot Hiccup seven times with my trank gun—that should give them the answer.

"I know," I said tonelessly, "but I really don't want to." Snotlout stared at his feet for a moment then looked carefully at me.

"Look, Astrid," he said softly, "I don't think he's become a bad guy. He's been through so much and he never wavered. I don't know what he was doing joining them...but I'm certain he had a plan. And he's desperate to talk to you. If you don't, the General will...and that won't go well. You owe him a few minutes, at least..." I could feel the scowl twist my face as I glared at him, but he was right. Knowing Hiccup had ultimately given me BERK and Stormfly: I owed him a chance to explain himself.

I felt sick but I headed straight down to the cells, determined to get this over with and move on. The part of me that was still in love with him was screaming at me to listen without prejudice but the soldier was just wanting it over, so I could draw a line under it...under us...and start to mend my broken heart. I showed my pass and was conducted into the cell block, then patted down. I checked my gun in at the desk and was finally taken to the cells.

He was the only prisoner there, sitting on the standard bunk with his knees drawn up to his chest and arms clasped around them like a waif, the horrible scar on his left arm on view. His bare foot and prosthetic were right on the edge of the bed and his shoulders were hunched, his head down. They had him in a grubby white T-shirt and grey sweat pants, his auburn hair unkempt but he looked up at my footsteps and his entire face lit with relief and hope, his forest green eyes shining.

"Astrid," he breathed, scrambling up to get to the bars, his hands gripping the metal tightly. He looked scruffy and thinner than usual, his entire body taut with urgency as he looked at me. I carefully remained well out of reach.

"Hiccup," I said neutrally. "I hear you were asking for me." He nodded eagerly.
"Yes, Milady..." he said quickly but my hand snapped up.

"Don't!" I snapped. "You gave up the right to call me that when you betrayed BERK. When you betrayed me!" I growled. He looked shocked at the anger in my tone and there was hurt in his eyes but he nodded.

"I...understand..." he murmured. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant." I glared at him.

"Well, go on then!" I snapped. "I don't have all day!" He backed up a pace and then nodded.

"What do you want to know?" he asked me softly. I folded my arms brusquely.

"The same question I asked you three times before, you lying bastard!" I spat "Why?" He looked at me wordlessly for a long time until I snorted and made to turn away.

"Astrid! No-wait!" he called desperately. "I'm sorry..." I stared at him, reading anxiety in his face and my eyes narrowed.

"What?" I growled. He took a slow breath, trying to calm himself.

"I-er-I'm sorry..." he mumbled. I turned fully to face him, my expression furious.

"Is that it?" I spat. "I'm sorry? How pathetic is that?" He flinched at the echo of the taunt he had sneered at me. "And what makes you think I will believe a word you say now, Mr 'I played you. I played them all. All I wanted was to get away'?" He cringed, turning away and all his hopeful expression vanished: he suddenly looked like a beaten dog.

"I'm sorry I'm not the person you thought I was," he murmured. "I'm not brave enough or strong enough to cope with being captured again." I stared at him.

"What?" My tone couldn't get colder. He backed away, no longer able to meet my eye.

"When-when we were shot down, they knocked us out...but I wasn't out long...and then they came for me..." he said quietly. "And-and as they took me out and as-as I was t-tied up and R-Ryker began to punch me I-I knew there was no p-point in denying who I was. B-because they kn-knew I was the Night Fury rider and I recognised them: the Grimborns. They are Drago's dragon hunters." Despondently, he rested back against the wall and slid down to sit on his heels. He stared at the floor.


"They had me. They had Toothless. They had you. And there was I, knowing that they would hand Toothless and me to Drago in a heartbeat and he would kill me. He swore...he swore he would murder me slowly and painfully when I escaped last time." He was trembling now, his voice ashamed. "And I really didn't want to die. So-so the only plan I could come up with was to-to surrender and beg to join them. Because I-I hoped that if I was with them, it would spare me being handed to Drago's torturers." He closed his eyes and hunched up again, once more hugging his knees to his chest.

I stared at him. I wasn't sure what to think. I could recall how badly he had been treated when we were kidnapped...Cami and I had rescued him then...but who could've rescued us when we were shot down? He was looking utterly wretched, his voice the soft plea for understanding I had heard before. But this was the same man who had sneered at me and claimed he had never cared for me.

"Okay. You joined them," I said coldly. "But what you did..."
"I saved your life!" he said suddenly, his eyes abruptly locking with mine.

"You hunted me! You rejected me. And when you had a chance to explain...you just made it worse!" I shouted at him. He scrambled up.

"They were monitoring me!" he blurted out. "They monitored us both. If I had told you what I was doing, they would have heard and realised what you meant to me and they would never have let you go."

"And what do I mean to you?" I asked him coldly. He stared at me in shock, as if I had spat in his face. He was breathing hard, his entire body tense.

"Everything," he said softly. "You mean everything—you and Toothless. And—and they were never going to let him go...and I could never leave him. They would just use him, like a weapon..." His voice was thick with emotion and he blinked several times. "But...I knew if I persuaded them that you didn't mean anything to me, then they'd be happier to dispose of you instead of keeping you as a hostage against me. And...Ryker wanted to rape you, Astrid—and he would have done if you'd stayed. The hunt was the only thing I could come up with to stop him...and I know it was horrible and I was scared they would reach you before I could but it was literally the only idea I had."

"It was a sadistic thing to do," I said icily. He lunged forward, gripping the bars, his voice pleading.

"I know," he begged, "but I guessed they would like it. They did because the pair of them are evil and cruel and very sadistic..." There was an edge of his voice that I picked up on, the same edge he had used when referring to situations where he had been wounded and tormented and I found myself wondering if they had really been all that welcoming to the skinny traitor. "And I gambled they wouldn't let me have Toothless...but they may give me Stormfly instead to follow you. And I trusted you would be Astrid and get her from me. I knew she would never hurt you! And I banked on you using her to get away."

"You're saying you planned that obscene farce to get me away?" I hissed. He rested his head against the bars.

"I left your helmet for you," he sighed. "Why would I do that if I wanted you dead, Astrid?" I paused. I had assumed it was carelessness...but was he just 'playing' me again?

"Where is Toothless?" I asked bluntly. He swallowed.

"He's in the glen," he sighed. "He's got a friend." He looked at me with a soft plea. "I...I need a favour..."

"I think you're all out of credit," I told him. With a groan, he slid to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

"I think you're all out of credit," I told him. With a groan, he slid to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

"Please!" he begged, his voice shaking with emotion. "You're the only other person he'll come to! I need...I need you to get him into the pen. There is another dragon with him, a very young female Night Fury that we stole from Drago. She's bonded with me as well...I had to, to stop her becoming his...I've called her Myrkr. It means Darkness in old Norse..." And I found the faintest smile on my lips: only Hiccup would name a dragon in a long dead language. "He was treating her badly...he's already beaten her and broken a wing. I-I couldn't leave her. And...I think she'll come to you because Toothless trusts you."

"I already have Stormfly," I reminded him and he nodded.
"She can still like you, let you train her," he said slowly. "And you can fly Toothless..."

And then it struck me: he had accepted his punishment and knew he would probably never see his dragon, his best friend again. Why did he do it? Why did he come back? He could have gone a million other places where he would be welcome and celebrated, where he would be treated properly.

"So why did you come back?" I asked him. There was a long pause and I saw his throat work, his head briefly inspecting the floor.

"You," he confessed. "I owed you the apology. I know BERK can look after the dragons better than anyone else...but that wouldn't have mattered because I know my Dad will lock me up forever. But I had to come back to see you, to apologise..."

"You broke my heart," I told him roughly and he nodded.

"I-I know," he said, staring at his hands. They were trembling and he had to clasp them tightly together. "I...know I gave up any hope with you, Astrid, but I...love you. And I'm sorry. It sounds pathetic and after what I said I know you can't ever believe me but I do. You-you are the ONLY person who has showed me any kindness, any love for so many years and it killed me to say what I did but I had to get you to leave and get them to believe that I didn't care for you. And with me being a traitor...and you informing BERK of that, then I had a shot at convincing Drago I wasn't one of the good guys any more. So I found Myrkr and his other dragons, I located the nest they have uncovered on Franz-Josef Land and I got help for...Heather."

"WHAT?" My glare would have melted steel. He recoiled.

"I read the reports," he revealed bleakly. "They had already given her up as a hopeless case, abandoned her to the effects of the drug—which will be lethal, by the way...but I knew from the data I downloaded from Alvin's base that there was an antitoxin and I bargained with Drago to get her the help. So he did...and there were some flashes of the old Heather...just enough to give me a little treacherous flash of hope...but not enough to convince me she would ever get back to normal." I stared at him, breathing hard.

"Let me get this straight," I growled. "You got Drago Bludvist, an evil madman with dragons, to spring Heather, a psychopath with pretty solid riding and instructing skills and implacable hatred of BERK and you left her there?"

"Um...wouldn't quite have put it like that..." he murmured, "...um...but yeah...sorry..."

"WHY?" He ran his fingers through his hair, tousling the wild auburn mess further.

"Because she was Ozzie's sister," he said miserably. "He was my only friend in BERK for so long, the one person who gave me some purpose when I was dragged from the States and dumped here by my Dad. I promised him I would look out for her when we were on missions, because he loved her and he didn't trust Dagur..."

"Good call," I murmured.

"And I swore I would do my best for her when he died because I knew Dagur wouldn't," he murmured. "I had to do it for him..."

"And you're sure it wasn't just for Dagur?" I asked pointedly. He sighed.

"I know you think..." he admitted softly and I strode forward.
"I know," I breathed and crouched opposite him, staring into the miserable forest green eyes. "Just for once, be honest with me, Hiccup. What happened?" I wasn't talking about his recent betrayal now. Wincing, he shook his head. He knew the only gesture of faith he could give me was the truth—the truth he had concealed and avoided ever since I arrived at BERK.

"We didn't have a relationship," he said quietly, unable to meet my eyes. There was a moment of hesitation, an abyss of pain he crossed to speak on, to give me the answer I needed as a sign of his trustworthiness. His voice betrayed his shame. "That was his thing, not mine. I'm not gay, Astrid: I was sexually abused. Dagur…raped me."

I stared at him. The last words were said, utterly devoid of emotion except the slight emphasis on the penultimate word. I knew there was something there, some bad history…but I hadn't even considered that he had been…hurt like that. I blinked.

"Oh." I sounded like a fool.

"I know," he sighed. "My father doesn't know, by the way—why would I tell him? It would just be another thing for him to rip me to pieces with." He swallowed. "Gobber, Gothi and Ozzie knew. No one else. The others just thought he's beaten me half to death—which he had to in order to stop me fighting him. I did everything I could to stop him, Astrid. Everything! And I never went to the infirmary afterward because they would know…Dad would know…Dagur would know he had won…And he never stopped wanting to take more from me…my dragon, my leg…and you…" He looked away but there were tears on his face now. "But…but I only killed him when he was trying to kill you…because he was all Heather had left."

"Heather's our enemy…" I reminded him quietly, watching his facade crack.

"But I promised," he whispered, palming the moisture off his cheeks. "And I failed. I found out about the dragons and the nest and his complex…but I couldn't help her. And then I knew…I had a chance to get the Night Terrors away, to free Smidvarg and get him to bring them back…and they're in the glen as well, with Toothless…" I stared at him.

"Then how…?" I asked and he dropped his head.

"I found a way to switch off the trackers," he admitted. "I've emailed the countermeasure and process to reactivate them to you…" I stared at him, shocked. "Astrid—I'm not your enemy…"

"But you betrayed BERK," I repeated, looking as he rested against the bars, his eyes closed and breathing ragged.

"I could've done so much more," he sighed. "When he got me to hack BERK, I saw the modifications Will and my team had made and I knew I could circumvent them if I tried…but I lied and said the system threw me out, when actually I manually activated Ragnarok to cover my tracks… Um…Drago wasn't too pleased, by the way…"

"Hiccup…does Drago know you can switch the trackers off?" I asked him. He shook his head and gave a small smile.

"He believed I failed as well," he said. "Not happy about that, to be honest." The edge was there again, the frisson of fear at the mention of a situation that almost certainly turned out badly for him. Snotlout's words rolled around my head: I don't think he's become a bad guy.

"Hiccup…how did you get Toothless back?" I asked, watching him lean against the bars. He sighed and closed his eyes as he spoke quietly..
"They needed him when they went to the nest...because they can't control the hatchlings either and dragons have died as a result..." he revealed. "So they let me out with him...and when we reached the nest, we were able to get the Terrors away...and then I was able to disable their craft and get on Toothless. We flew to Drago's complex at top speed and grabbed Myrkr before they knew what was coming. And then...I came here..."

"Hiccup...I..." My anger was dissipating...not completely because I was still so mad at how stupid he had been. But I began to understand his thinking because I don't think I could ever fully appreciate how badly he had been treated for so long...and how he couldn't face another round of torture at the hands of Ryker or Drago or-or anyone, of that matter. He had baulked...but could I blame him? Why should I have to expect this young man, cruelly discarded and ignored by his father, abandoned and abused for some many years, scarred mentally and physically, to endure sadistic torment when there was a way round it? He had some appalling psychological wounds and I knew how he undervalued himself. Deciding to give himself up, to surrender to the enemy...to get his dragon and me away would be typical. As would his coming back here to give himself up to the good guys to take his punishment.

"Why didn't you just go?" I asked him in a low voice.

"Because I would never see you again," he said wretchedly and finally he opened his eyes. "And I know I sacrificed us when I made my choice...you are here and safe and Toothless and Myrkr and the Night Terrors are all here and free..." And I shuddered-because his eyes were terrified.

"Hiccup-the General will condemn you to life in prison..." I said quietly. He nodded desperately, curling round to face me.

"No...he'll have me taken away, to some intelligence place they have for dangerous criminals...because they can't ever risk me talking to anyone who would believe me...and then I will vanish forever..." His voice was trembling.

"Why couldn't you have just warned me that it was an act?" I sighed, staring into his face and seeing him blinking.

"I hoped you would realise when I called you stupid," he sighed. "Gods, Astrid-you are the smartest, bravest, most determined woman I have ever met...and I know I don't get out much but don't think of that as an insult because I can't imagine ever meeting anyone more amazing than you. And now I never will...but I don't want anyone else. And I know I hurt you and I know I was stupid but I know you will look after my bud and you won't let Drago harm the Team and I love you and need you and I don't know how I can ever go on without you..." And he broke, tears trickling down his face, his voice choking to silence as sobs wracked him. He curled up, trying to shy away...and I reached through, my hand hesitating an inch from his shaking shape.

"Hiccup...please..." I said suddenly, gently touching his shoulder. He just sobbed harder, his face pressed into his hands...but he leaned very slightly against my hand.

"I...thought...you...trusted...me..." he sobbed. "I thought...you knew...I loved you..."

"And I thought you loved me...but you tried to kill me..." I retorted, though my stomach was really dancing with a horrible feeling of guilt. He was shaking his head.

"I n-never m-made any m-move against y-you..." he wept. "I j-just s-said I w-would...so V-viggo and Ryker would b-believe me..." He tried to take a breath. "All...all I ever wanted was for you and Toothless to be free. And...to spend the r-rest of my life with you..."
"Oh God," I murmured, staring at him and realising—and finally accepting—the truth. He had been unable to face another round of torture and had thought quickly and brilliantly, convincing the horrible sadistic and brutal Grimborns to accept him, managing to get me to declare him a traitor and help me escape by allowing me to steal my own dragon. And then he had co-operated with the Grimborns and Drago, a man who terrified him, in order to try to help a woman who had sworn to kill him painfully and slowly to release his dragon.

"I believe you," I murmured, feeling my eyes prickle with tears. And then he lifted his head, his shining green eyes urgently searching my face for any artifice…and finding none. He urgently turned and grasped my hand in both of his, lifting it to his face and pressing my hand to his lips. His eyes closed again and he held my hand there for a long moment, before pulling away.

"Thank you," he murmured hoarsely. Tentatively, he inched forward and hesitantly extended his hand through the bars to pause, hovering inches from my face. I nodded and he very tenderly stroked my cheek, a tiny brave smile lifting his sorrowful face. "It…it won't change my fate but at least…I know someone will miss me…"

"Get away!" the guard shouted, seeing him reaching beyond the cell. We both glanced up…as the taser hit him. I stared in shock as the current surged through him and he gasped, frightened eyes wide as he jerked and then slammed to the floor. I scrambled up as the guard urgently unlocked the door and steamed in, kicking Hiccup's prone body, each thudding blow shuddering through him. Trembling, he grunted in pain as I clenched my fists.

"HALT!" I shouted, my voice a shout of rage. The guard froze mid-kick. "ATTENTION!" I bellowed and he reluctantly stood to attention, leaving the prisoner curled, shaking at his feet. "Get out of the cell and stand over there. If you come within ten feet of this cell until I give permission, I will have you on night guard duty for the next month!"

"Yes, Ma'am!" he said through gritted teeth and walked back. I stared at him…then walked into the cell, dropping to my knees by the curled up shape. Quietly, I reached down and lifted his bowed head.

"Hiccup?" I murmured, leaning closer. "I'm here…" Breathing hard, trembling all over from the aftermath of the current and the blows, the dazed green eyes stared imploringly up into my face.

"Astrid?" he breathed. A hand gently rose to rest on my wrist and I could feel him shaking. I nodded then leaned closer and slid an arm under him and he wrapped his arms around me, curling against me and burying his head in my shoulder as I hugged him fiercely. Far skinnier than I remembered him feeling, he pressed hard against me and I felt him desperately questing for comfort as he had so many times in our relationship. I tightened my hug around his warm body and felt him nuzzle into my neck as I curled against him. He was weeping and so was I—because though I had realised why he had done what he had done and that he hadn't truly given anything away, he had betrayed BERK…and his father would never forgive him.

I feared that no matter what happened, even though I really believed in him and trusted him, I would lose him forever…
Furies Galore

Fifty-One: Furies Galore.

After I left him, I went straight to see Major Gothi. She was my direct superior and I trusted her implicitly…and she knew about what had happened to Hiccup. She read my face perfectly and we went into her office: I had been here a lot already for my assessments, reflections and feedback and I knew she was precise, calm and fair. So I made sure the door was locked and I quietly and determinedly spoke to her. I told her what Hiccup and I had discussed, what he had revealed…and I asked her if it was true.

Her eyes were sad as she stared at the desk for a long time…and then she nodded. Then she began to type and in the mechanical, emotionless voice that her synthesiser generated, Gothi told me what had happened to Hiccup, how he had been ambushed outside Pen One, too far from help and how he had been beaten savagely before being raped. How he had staggered back the mile-long trek to his room and had hidden, badly injured and wracked by utter shame and self-loathing. How he had cut himself before overcoming the impulse and how he had seriously considered suicide. And how he had been treated covertly by Gothi and Gobber so that no one would know of his true injuries. And she confirmed that, to the best of her knowledge, it had only been once, though her observations revealed that Dagur definitely had his eye on Hiccup…until he had defected.

And she had not, for one moment, believed that Hiccup was a traitor.

That made me feel about a million times worse because I had…in no small part due to how convincing he had been. He knew how to insult me, how to press my buttons and I had taken the bait. He had played me…but only to his disadvantage. And, he had explained, after he had finally calmed and sat next to me on his miserable, hard bed, his hand tentatively twined with mine, that he knew I was hopeless at acting and that I had a temper which would make me draw the wrong conclusion. I had punched him then-in the shoulder, obviously-for being a brilliant and daring smartass and knowing me too well. I know I can't act: I am direct, forthright and honest-always have been, always intend to be. He told me then that he couldn't have explained what he was doing, even if he had been granted the chance because I wouldn't convince them: I just wished that he hadn't convinced me.

After Gothi, I went to see Gobber and explained what we had discussed. He confirmed Gothi's tale and also that he hadn't believed Hiccup was a traitor. "That laddie is clever, determined and brave. And he loves ye wi' all his heart. He would ne'er betray his lass."

"You didn't hear him, Gobber-he was really convincing," I grumbled, my cheeks flushed with shame. He gave a low chuckle.

"Aye-the lad has a rare talent for mimicry and putting a brave face on," he revealed. "He had to act that everything was normal, that he wasn't abandoned or ignored or beaten through his whole life. And he's got very good at it." I ran my hands through my hair.

"Yeah…wished I'd known just how good he was before this," I murmured then looked up into Gobber's big face. "Stoick won't let this go, will he?"

"He's sworn tae court martial the boy," he confirmed. "Laddie had always been a disappointment tae his father and finally, his father has a legitimate means o' punishing the boy for every second of humiliation he feels for having such a son..." I scowled.
"What, you mean having such a brave, clever determined son?" I asked. Gobber shook his head.

"He's nae the son he wanted," he sighed. "Stoick wanted a Snotlout. But he got a Hiccup-sarcastic, unconventional, brilliant, caring-and missed the fact that under that scrawny exterior, there is the equal o' his father in determination, bravery and loyalty."

"But there isn't," I said bleakly. "He admitted he was afraid of being tortured-and hatched the plan to appear to co-operate to get me and Toothless away…"

"Yeah-because bein' beaten and tortured and locked in a cell is so much more productive than getting free run o' the enemy's base!" Gobber said sarcastically. "And yer here, aren't ye, lass?" I nodded, cheeks flaring with shame.

"He just doesn't value himself at all!" I exploded. "I mean, he is so amazing but he doesn't see it! He's brought Toothless back-and the Terrors…" I didn't mention the baby Night Fury because I wasn't sure how Gobber would react…and I wanted to check it out for myself. "And…he thinks the General will send him to some secret military intel prison, a black hole where he will vanish forever…" With a start, Gobber stared at me, jaw hanging loose.

"He said that?" he murmured.

"Stoick told him he wished Hiccup had never been born," I revealed softly. "He keeps blaming him for his mother's death, even though she was killed by Drago…but just before we went after the Terrors, he said that. It completely broke him, Gobber. I think he thought they were starting to have a relationship…and Stoick shattered him. He blamed Hiccup for the Terrors getting out when it was Tuff who released them off his own back. And then Stoick threatened Hiccup with jail and grounding if he didn't get them back!"

"I know losing Toothless would kill him," Gobber groaned. "And Stoick is determined to do just that to him." I stood and then paused.

"Sir…a court martial requires a panel of senior officers, does it not?" I asked. Blue eyes narrowing, Gobber nodded, his blonde unibrow dipping.

"Lassie, what're ye gettin' at?" he asked.

"Under the provisions of the Armed Services Act 2006, a court martial needs a judge and a jury of three to seven commissioned officers," I explained. "And there are only four commissioned officers in this base. Assuming this base is run under British Military Justice provisions per the Judge Advocate General…"

"I think Stoick imagines he's still in the US Army," Gobber said gloomily. "He'll run a military tribunal of the senior officers-with him as chair." I folded my arms.

"We all know the huge problem with all of this," I sighed. "None of us are officially in either-well, I am RAMC but on indefinite secondment. And Hiccup is definitely not part of any military organisation. He's a civilian…"

"With a military rank…" Gobber reminded me. I groaned: I had insisted he had a rank in order to get the respect and co-operation fro the Riders…but then I smiled.

"He actually has a Naval Rank," I smiled. "Not many ships round here…"

"I have a duck for me bath, does that count?" Gobber volunteered, his eyes twinkling. "So yer his defence counsel, lass?" I froze. Had I just volunteered? And then my heart kicked me hard: of
course I had! If I wanted to make up to Hiccup, to apologise for not trusting him and make sure I
didn't lose my amazing and oh-so-desperate boyfriend. I nodded.

"I am," I confirmed. "And you'll be in the Tribunal?"

"I would hope," he said with a wink. "But Stoick is a man on a mission…"

"And a man who eats and breathes military protocol," I realised. "This will be by the book."

"Though Odin only knows which book," Gobber grumbled. "He's probably rewriting it as we
speak!"

"Then it's lucky I'm a quick study," I told him and headed for the door. He frowned.

"Where're ye goin', lass?" he asked in surprise. I gave a small smile.

"I think Hiccup needs all the friends he can get," I reminded him. "And I'm off to get them…"

I headed out to the glen…though not alone. I decided to take Cami and Ruff, my girl-friends,
because I needed to talk to them in private about Hiccup. Of course, Tuff found out his sister was
coming out and tagged along, uninvited. The Snotlout came looking for Tuff and he and Gustav
called Eret and Fishlegs so in the end, almost the whole team were trudging out of the side-door,
wrapped up against the bitter wind. I rolled my eyes: just for once, it would be nice not to have to
bring the boys. Tuff was capable of some amazing feats but a lot of the time he was an idiot;
Snotlout was tentatively hitting on me again because Hiccup was apparently out of the picture and
Gustav was like a damned twelve year old. I sped up and stalked down the glen as Cami and Ruff
trudged after me. Gustav, Tuff and Snotlout had found at small amount of snow and had started a
snowball fight.

"Wait up!" Cami called, trotting to keep up. I paused and looked round, to see her and Ruff
scrambling after me. "Not...not all of us are as fit as you, Astrid!" I huffed but waited as they
cought up.

"Okay, spill!" Ruff said sternly. "I know you wanted just us on this...walk... What's on your mind.
You've been in and out of meetings ever since you visited Captain Traitor in the cells!"

"He's not a traitor," I mumbled. Ruff snorted and Cami folded her arms.

"I think he is," she scoffed. "He didn't deny it. And you saw him working with the enemy..."

"Yeah...he was...under cover..."

They're stared at me...and then both burst out laughing. "C'mon, that is the oldest line in the book!"
Ruff scorned. "The thought that the dork could go undercover..." I glared at her.

"Unfortunately, he is really good at pretending he is what he isn't," I told her tartly. "Case in point:
pretending to be a military commander when he has no training, rank, experience or senior
support!" That shut them up.

"But he was away for days and days!" Cami protested. "He would have run sooner if he was
undercover..."

"Only when the trusted him enough to get Toothless..." I reminded them. "He would never go
without Toothless..." Ruff gave a grudging nod as we ambled down the slope, avoiding patches of
ice.
"I suppose," she grumbled. "But you thought he was a traitor..." I turned and glared at her.

"I was wrong, okay?" I snapped. "I was a total bitch-idiot. God, even blondes would be embarrassed at how stupidly I behaved!"

"Um...all blondes here..." Cami reminded me.

"Yeah-no blondist comments here-blondie!" Ruff put in. I shrugged.

"My point is... Hiccup was totally convincing...but I know him. And he...he told me something that convinced me, something he never wanted me to know, I suspect...as a gesture of good faith. I checked it out: he was on the level. And now he's facing court martial and life in prison because I was an idiot and his God-damned father will ONLY ever belief the worst of his son. And because the fool will do anything for his dragon!"

"Okay, convince us," Cami said, her eyes narrowing. I recalled she was from a clan of scammers and thieves: it meant she was pretty astute and could smell bullshit at a thousand paces.

"He got me away on Stormfly," I explained.

"You stole her!" Ruff scoffed.

"My helmet was on her when I got her to throw Hiccup," I explained.

"So what? They must've..." Ruff argued.

"I was wearing it when captured!" I retorted. "Why would they stow it in her saddle?"

"Wait...Stormfly threw Hiccup?" Cami asked.

"I did shoot at him as well!" I added.

"Wow...remind me NOT to hack you off!" Ruff grinned, recalling how many times I had shot him when he was captured...or surrendered.

"Even so...Hiccup never loses his seat...no matter how mad the dragon..." Cami mused. "He's an exceptional rider." She stared at me. "You may have a point...one single small point..." I shrugged.

"And what was this big secret?" Ruff pressed. "C'mon, Asty...you can tell us..."

"Actually, I can't," I said quietly. "He told me in confidence and it was something incredibly personal. I am convinced..."

"Is it about Dagur?" Ruff asked eagerly. "I knew they were an item. I..."

"They aren't...weren't...an item!" I snapped. "Do you have any idea how hurtful that is to him that you and the rest keep trotting out that...shit? Dagur was absolutely awful to Hiccup and tormented him for years. Dagur is the last person he has any feeling for...except hatred." Shocked at the vehemence of my tone, Ruff actually backed up a step. "He loves me. He still loves me. And he's broken that he thinks he's blown it with me..."

"Has he?" Cami asked thoughtfully. I stared at her and then shook my head.

"No," I sighed. "Just because he's a total idiot and he made an outrageously bad decision with the best of intentions doesn't mean I've given up on him." I turned away. "I still love and want him. I just need to stop the General burying him..."
"And you know we're with you, right?" Cami asked me...and I managed a wan smile.

"I'd hoped," I admitted, "though you did a good job of beating him up!"

"Actually, we came second to Lieutenant 'fists-of-steel'!" Ruff grinned and I managed to look slightly smug. Then I scanned the glen and sighed. I knew he was there.

"TOOTHLESS!" I bellowed. "I NEED YOUR HELP! HICCUP NEEDS YOUR HELP!" The others gave me a 'really?' look. Ruff rolled her eyes.

"Even Tuff wouldn't try that!" she huffed.

"Yes, he would! He tried calling his com when he lost it!" Cami reminded her. "But really, Astrid? C'mon, sister...it isn't gonna be as simple as..."

The answering roar that echoed through the glen felt like a personal triumph...as did the appearance of a black shape with a red prosthetic tail, bounding down the slope at top speed towards me. Because I was watching for her, I saw the little grey shape bouncing after Toothless and my grin widened.

"Toothless!" I laughed as the Night Fury galloped at me and knocked me down, licking me furiously. "Yuk! That so doesn't wash out!" I scrambled up but the over-eager dragon kept on licking and gently head-butting me, purring excitedly. "Yeah, I missed you as well...and I know Stormfly will be so happy to see you, buddy!" I could almost hear the others' jaws drop at how affectionate Hiccup's dragon was being to me. "What? I go flying a lot with Hiccup! Of course, I know Toothless!" I reminded them, stroking his face gently...and then I crouched down, peering at the slate grey shape behind him.

"No way..." I heard Cami murmur.

"You got ta be kidding me!" was Ruffnut's verdict.

"Hi, Myrkr," I said gently, staring at the timid shape huddling behind the bigger dragon. Big green eyes inspected me carefully and noted how relaxed Toothless had been with me. "I'm Hiccup's friend, Astrid. I was hoping you'd be my friend as well..." And then I stretched out my hand and lowered my head, looking away. There was a pause...and then a collective intake of breath as the soft, warm rounded muzzle pressed into my hand. I smiled and looked back at her, stroking her gently and cooing to the nervous little dragon.

"How does he do it?" Cami asked, shocked. "He already rides the rarest dragon in the world and when he runs off undercover...or whatever...he gets his hands on another one!" Toothless crooned and nudged me with his saddlebag: it was really full and I rubbed little Myrkr while reaching out and staring at a large-ostrich sized-jet black egg. I had never seen one of these—though I had seen the other eggs in the Hatching Pit—but I instinctively knew which egg Hiccup would snatch.

"I think you should make that a hat trick!" I advised them and Ruffnut huffed.

"You know, I think Snot will be hugely pissed off," she grumped. "He originally wanted Toothless and now Hiccup is cornering the market..."

"Did I hear my name?" the sergeant in question asked, arriving. He was covered in snow. The others—Tuff, Gustav, Fishlegs and Eret—were all trailing behind, looking as of they had been caught in a blizzard as they finally caught up with us...and then they all gasped.

"I don't believe it" Snotlout gasped. "How does he do it?"
"He's Hiccup!" I grinned, still stroking the little Night Fury. "This is Myrkr. He rescued her from Drago. And I guess he snatched the egg from that nest up in Franz-Josef Land."

"But how are you...?" Eret asked in shock. I stared and then I realised-I was still the newest rider: I shouldn't be able to do any of this...but I knew why. I shrugged.

"Maybe Hiccup is contagious?" I suggested.


"Um...I think only dogs can get Distemper..." I pointed out.

"Are you sure?" he asked me suspiciously. Giving him my coldest glare, I folded my arms.

"Which one of us has a medical degree, Tuff?" I asked him pointedly. He subsided.

"Er, is it you Lieutenant Doctor Astrid sir?" he guessed.

"Correct," I said smugly...and then my com buzzed. "Hofferson. Go."

"Lassie, whate'er yer doing, now would be a smashing time tae come back," Gobber said over the com. "The General is heading down to see his son!" I froze and looked at the rest of the Team. Sharing glances, Snotlout spoke up for them all.

"Go!" he said swiftly. "Um, I think the General may tear him limb from limb..." I was already leaping onto Toothless's saddle as Myrkr whimpered. I patted my lap and the little Night Fury bounded onto the saddle with me. Carefully-because I could see she had half-healed wounds and a splinted broken wing-I wrapped an arm around her and leaned forward.

"C'mon, Toothless-Hiccup needs us!" I said and without hesitation, he shot into the air, leaving the others gasping and Tuffnut of all people scowling.

"Huh! I had dibs on T!" he grumbled as we vanished towards the Base.

The first Hiccup knew he had another visitor was the entry of a second guard, who commanded him to walk to the bars and put his hands through so they could be shackled, immobilising him. It was something he profoundly hated because he had been restrained too many times with too many bad outcomes but the guards threatened him with tasers and he knew they wouldn't hesitate to taser him into submission then shackle him up anyway. Wearily, he complied.

The visit from Astrid had been a blessing and a curse, for it had brought back full force everything he had lost. She had been justifiably mad and he cringed at how ineptly he had explained himself. It wasn't as if he hadn't rehearsed the conversation every minute since his capture, when his last sight had been her steely glare as she shot trank after trank into him...but the sight of an angry Astrid Hofferson had turned his brain to mush and he had stumbled over his carefully prepared speech. And then she had asked him the question.

It had been the one thing he had sworn never to tell her, the most shameful confession he could make that he knew totally undermined him as a man...especially to the girl he loved. But it was also the most personal and private secret he could offer, his ultimate gesture of good faith...so he had told her...and she had forgiven him. The memory of her arms, strong around his shaking body, her warmth seeping into him was almost too much to bear because he craved her so much...and he knew now when he lost her, it would be a thousand times worse. But he couldn't see himself being
allowed his freedom...if his father had anything to do with it.

So when the guards snapped to attention and saluted, he felt his throat dry. Helpless and shackled, he could only stare up in horror as General Stoick Haddock stomped into the room. The cold grey-green eyes narrowed with disdain as he glared at the helpless prisoner…and then they opened the cell door and he walked in.

There was an aeons-long awkward moment as the soldier stared at his son and then Hiccup swallowed. "Really, Dad?" he asked pointedly. "What d'you think I'm gonna do? Jump you? Escape? Fight my way through you, the two men in here and Grimsdaal who's standing at the door when you could literally beat me to death with one hand tied behind your back?"

"You are a traitor!" Stoick snarled.

"And that automatically makes me Superman, right? At least get these damned shackles off! I can hardly talk to you chained facing the bars…and I presume with you being here that you did want to talk to me?"

Stoick paused for a long moment, then nodded to the guard. Hiccup was breathing hard with relief as he heard the click and felt the cold pressure in his wrists ease as the shackles were removed. Immediately, he stumbled back away from his father, rubbing his wrists and warily watching the much larger man. Hiccup was tall and lean, skinnier than he had been before he left BERK—but his father topped him by a head and probably weighted three times as much, a vast mountain of a man sheathed in a crisp General's uniform. The contrast couldn't have been more obvious.

"Thanks," Hiccup said carefully: he knew his father better than Stoick would have believed and he could sense the explosion coming, Mentally, he steeled himself: whatever Stoick said would be cruel and painful.

"Why did you betray me, boy?"

_Yup. As expected. It was always about Stoick._ "I had to make a choice in a situation which was untenable," Hiccup tried to explain. "There was no hope in being captured again, no point in being beaten to a pulp for the nth time and lying in a cell until I got handed to Drago to be executed for the crime of being your son. I made a command decision to do what I could to get Astrid and Toothless away…and maybe find out something useful." Hiccup watched his father's face as he spoke, his calm delivery masking his deep unease. Because though he had used language Stoick should understand, his father always spoke another language as well—disappointment in Hiccup. It was something he was fluent in.

"So you surrendered because you were a coward and hoped you could find some intelligence to save your worthless life!" Stoick growled.

"Um…probably wouldn't have put it like that…" Not to you. I did to Astrid because I will always be honest with her, because I love her...

"YOU SHAME ME!" Stoick bellowed and Hiccup recoiled a pace. His father had gone scarlet with rage and his massive fists were clenched so tightly the knuckles showed white. "All I expect is that you show the courage and loyalty expected of a Haddock!" he shouted, advancing in his son.

"Have you any idea how ridiculous that actually sounds?" Hiccup attempted, backing away rapidly…until his back hit the bars of the cell and he was cornered.

"And…and THIS! Stoick sneered at full volume. "You are here, accused of treason, imprisoned..."
awaiting trial for your life…and you make jokes? Have you any idea how serious this is?" Hiccup stared up into the enraged face of the man towering over him, trapping him back against the bar and gave a small nod.

"Er…kinda in the moment here," he muttered. "I know exactly where I am and what I'm facing. I know that my father dragged me into a secret military operation and ignored me. I know I'm not part of any military organisation. I know I have no military training. I know I have been effectively forced to lead a group of soldiers who have given me no respect but a cart load of shit for years. I know I have been tortured by traitors within this very base and my commander—my own father—disbelieved my word and just screamed at me to co-operate. I know I was in the hands of men who were about to inflict yet more horrific pain and then hand me over to the man who had started to carve me up as a way of getting to you. I know my best friend—my dragon—and the woman I love were prisoners and I had to do something to alter the odds because you people would NEVER have found us. And I know I came back because I trusted that I would be given the same chance and understanding that you granted Dagur and Heather and even your own gods-damned traitor of a brother!"

Stoick hit him.

oOo

I arrived in the observation station to hear Stoick call his son a coward and listened to Hiccup's very measured and calm appraisal of his entire time in BERK. I shot Gobber and Grimsdaal looks: we were all watching, listening and recording…and then we saw Stoick pull back his arm and punch the prisoner.

There was a brief moment where we all stared as Hiccup slid down to the floor, blood trickling from his nose before Stoick grabbed a meaty handful of his now-bloodstained T-shirt and punched him again.

"Oh shit, he'll kill him," I breathed and saw Gobber reaching the same conclusion. As one, we raced from the station and burst into the cell block, shoving the guards aside. Stoick had grabbed his son again and had thrown him hard against the wall, watching him slide pretty limply down and sprawl on the floor. "STOP!" I shouted as we arrived at the cell, entering without invitation.

"Get out, Lieutenant!" Stoick growled. "That's an order!"

"I'm afraid I cannot obey that order, sir, because it would make me an accomplice to murder," I told him shortly. "Step away from the prisoner. That's enough!" There was a pause…and then he grabbed Hiccup again.

"Stoick!" Gobber's voice was rough, strained. "Please…ye canna do this. Dinnae throw away yer career on this!"

"Sir!" I added, seeing him draw his arm back. I drew and cocked my weapon with one swift movement. "Release the prisoner!" The General froze at the click as the hammer cocked.

"That's treason!" Stoick growled, his eyes swinging to glare fiercely at me.

"Oh, everythin's treason to you, Dad…" Hiccup mumbled blearily.

"Shut up…" I said through gritted teeth. "Not helping…"

"Sorry…" he mumbled thickly. "Thought…"
"SIR!" I repeated, very obviously levelling my weapon at him. "You are to release the prisoner NOW! I am pretty sure you recall the Geneva Convention? About humane treatment of prisoners…?"

"This organisation is not under that protocol!" Stoick growled.

"But we both are, aren't we?" I reminded him. "We are serving military officers and our actions are bound by it-no matter what you may try to tell yourself. The prisoner is an irritating smart-mouthed kid…"

"Pretty sure I'm a few months older than you…" Hiccup murmured. I gave him a brief very sharp look.

"But he is a prisoner and hasn't been convicted of anything," I reminded him. "And this young man is your son. Do not do anything you may ultimately regret. You came here to talk to him. I suggest you try that first…"

"Lieutenant…" Stoick growled, his furious gaze locking on me.

"I will have you removed from command again, sir, if you continue-because you are not behaving rationally," I snapped. "He has made some very big mistakes but he was acting under command prerogative and that grants him some significant discretion to manage a dangerous field situation where he cannot possibly run his plan past a more senior officer!"

"Is that going to be his defence?" Stoick scoffed, slowly lowering his hand. He turned back to look at the limp shape in his hands, the bloody face and dazed forest green eyes turned towards him. With a dismissive movement, he tossed Hiccup across the cell. With a clang, he hit the bars and slid down, hands rising to cradle his aching head, throbbing from the impact against the bars.

"Among others," I said, lowering and holstering my weapon. He glared at me and then turned back to the huddled shape at the back of the cell.

"You really are a disgrace," he breathed to his son and Hiccup flinched as if he had been struck.

"Dad…please…" he begged softly. "I had to try something else because they would get Toothless and Astrid and I would be killed. I'm not a soldier, Dad. I never signed up to die in defence of the country or the world or anything like that. I'm a computer geek and a dragon rider! I can only do what I think is right to try to protect the people I love. I never betrayed anything."

"YOU BETRAYED ME!" Stoick shouted at him. "You betrayed my reputation! You betrayed my honour! You betrayed every hour I have spent in the service of our country, fighting to protect us from obvious and unseen threats to our way of life! You betrayed our forebears and our distinguished history of service and dedication! And you betrayed me because I thought you were behaving like the son I had hoped for-a proper, courageous, effective soldier!"

"So I wasn't the person who matched up to your impossible ideal," Hiccup said deceptively. "I was just who I am…I was just the person who got Astrid and Stormfly and Toothless and the Terrors and myself out of their hands along with another dragon egg, the location of Drago's nest and a baby Night Fury. Sorry. I can't be a dream…I can only be Hiccup…"

And it was obvious, looking at the General, that he hadn't registered what his son had said, hadn't acknowledged the amazing feats he had achieved and the intelligence he had brought back… though Gobber snatched a sudden, shocked look at me. I gave a very small nod…and then the Colonel stared at the battered prisoner much more intently, silently promising to have a very long
talk with Hiccup about what he had said…and get those details while they were still of value. No, all Stoick saw was someone who had surrendered to the enemy because they were afraid, not the reasons why they had done that or the ultimate aim and outcome. It struck me that, for a man who worked with intel and counter-terrorism, Stoick had a very rigid and inflexible mind…especially where his son as concerned.

"You have shamed me for the last time…" Stoick snarled to the slumped shape, pressed back against the bars and staring hopelessly up at the implacable shape of his father. "You will face the Tribunal for your fate. But know this: as of now, you are not a Haddock. YOU ARE NOT MY SON!"

And with that, he shoved past me and stormed from the cell and out of the block. Pausing for just a heartbeat, I raced forward and skidded to my knees by Hiccup, raising a hand to his bloody face. He was literally shaking, his eyes wide with terrible hurt. Wordlessly, he pressed against me, burying his bloody face in my shoulder and wrapping his arms around me. I just held him fiercely, feeling him shake and looking helplessly up to Gobber.

"It's over," Hiccup whispered. "I've lost him."

And that broke my heart too. Because he had always hoped, always striven to please his father, to make him proud…but now, finally, he had given up.
I persuaded Gobber to release Hiccup to my custody—which mean the infirmary in the first instance, so I could get Gothi to check him over. He was quiet and withdrawn, head down and unable to meet the hostile and accusing glares that everyone was firing at him as I led him in and took him straight to Gothi. She stared up at him for less than a moment before hugging him and it was touching to see him crouch forward to fold his long arms around her tiny, bowed shape. Then she pulled him to the couch and he passively allowed her to check him over, asking short queries in her mechanical voice. I made to leave, to give him his privacy but he stretched an arm out to me and his eyes begged me to stay, so I moved from jailor to next of kin without missing a beat.

Gothi's verdict was pretty damning. He had lost weight and had been badly beaten. There was a hairline crack on one cheek—from his father's punch—and he was concussed. There were older scars on his body that had happened in the last couple of weeks since we had been captured, confirming my guess that though he had supposedly joined them, none of them had treated him well. The cut to the side of his neck worried me: he flinched when she asked him about it and clammed up, which I recognised was him trying to cope with a traumatic experience. He really had never learned to talk—to trust-anyone. So I swore to make him trust me.

Once she was done, I took him to the mess: it wasn't official mealtimes but I had commed the chef and he had his team had whipped us up something and I locked the door and made sure he ate it, watching him wolf the plate like a starving man. Breathing hard, he looked up at me as he had almost finished and finally asked me: "Why?" And I had a much better answer than he managed to the same question.

"Because I love you, doofus, and I'm not having you wasting away or suffering if I can do anything about it!" I told him determinedly. His eyes widened and then he smiled, though it was a very melancholy expression.

"Um…fairly sure I'm about to stand trial for treason," he sighed. "I think they shoot you for that!"

"Not if I can help it," I said firmly. "Your father is being wholly unreasonable and I am certain…from reading his dossier and reports of his previous missions…that he has granted far greater latitude to officers on his teams when on mission. He expects standards from you that are unachievable and unreasonable even from fully trained specialist covert ops soldiers," I told him softly. He sagged.

"I'm never going to be good enough for him," he murmured and turned back to his plate, but his appetite seemed to have gone. I leaned forward and grasped his hand, my thumb stroking over the back of his hand.

"You're good enough for me," I murmured softly. "And I won't let him harm you, Dragon Boy. If I have to recruit every damned officer in the base, I won't allow him to convict you and lock you up. You did what you felt you had to and you may have done it from a place of fear but it was the right decision—I understand that now." His eyes flicked up and there was sudden relief and gratitude…and I felt a huge weight of responsibility to him now that he had been crushingly and finally rejected by his father.

"Thanks," he said quietly, staring at his plate. He visibly forced himself to clean it and then look up. "So what now?" I rose and took his hand, gently leading him along to Pen Two, where I led
him in. His access codes had all been revoked as had his unique visual ident system and his com
was effectively a tag, like they put on criminals: if he removed it, he was to be hunted down and
imprisoned. But I didn't think he'd run from this place because the only things he valued were here-
Toothless, his best friend…and me. I let us in, shoved him through the portal and closed the door
swiftly, then shoved him forward and whistled. The caw as Stormfly swooped in was matched by
the roar of a Night Fury and the broken expression on his face lightened to a smile as Toothless
bounded into view, his gummy smile and wide green gaze locked only on his beloved Rider.
Hiccup didn't even have a chance to exclaim before the dragon landed on him, licking him
furiously until he was drenched in tenacious dragon saliva and laughing in happiness at the
reunion.

"BUD! It's so good to see you!" he gasped, breathless after the vigorous reunion. Toothless gave a
delighted warble and butted against the battered young Rider as I stroked Stormfly's nose horn and
face. Then I peered round the corner and beckoned at the timid slate grey shape of the little female.

"C'mon, Myrkr!" I called gently and she galloped forward, pressing against my outstretched
hands…and then running to Hiccup and nuzzling him urgently. He sat up and hugged her softly,
the happiness in his face reminding me of how unhappy he truly was. Quietly, I lifted the com to
my lips.

"Cami?" I murmured down the line.

"L-T? What can I do for you?" she responded immediately. I glanced over to Hiccup, who was
capering around with the two Night Furies.

"I need a favour," I said with a hint of shame. "Um…I need you to move my stuff back into our
room. ASAP!"

"Don't tell me she's changed her mind again!" Ruff's voice floated over the link.

"Already in hand," Cami reported, shushing her.

"I'm not moving this furniture for a fourth time!" Tuff complained.

"Maybe this is some sort of exercise…slave driver…" Ruff added.

"The moment we heard you defending Commander Dragon Boy, we knew you'd want to have your
stuff moved back," Cami reported. "So Snot and Eret organised us. We're almost done. How did
the talk with the General go?"

"Commander Dragon Boy?"

"Hey-YOU call him that! The talk?"

"Hmm…have you heard of the Hindenburg crashing and catching fire in a total firestorm and
burning to a crisp…?"

"Seen the footage on Youtube…"

"Worse than that!"

"Oh crap…so what now?"

"Trial. The General wants to bury his son in prison for ever…and Hiccup doesn't deserve it," I told
her. "We may need to come up with a plan."
"Oh, good," Cami said, her voice telling me she was grinning. "I pity the General…almost."

"Is Snot there?" I asked.

"Ready and willing, L-T," he said, joining in.

"Can you speak to Grimsdaal and Will and get us 24/7 surveillance on the Grimborns base and Drago's complex? And also that nest on Franz-Josef Land? We need to know where they are and if they are heading this way! While all the senior officers and being distracted by this…nonsense…I really need you guys to make sure Drago isn't outflanking us. He knows that Hiccup was in his base and has been through his systems. He knows Hiccup has seen his dragons and the nest. So he is temporarily under a disadvantage. I can't see him accepting that for long." My tone was grim. Drago had tried to kill Hiccup at least three times and I hated the idea that this very powerful and vengeful man was after BERK while we were playing out this ugly family drama.

"On it!" Snot reported as I closed the link and turned to see my boyfriend on Toothless, petting him and bounding around, the little Night Fury capering around them. I smiled and watched him, still stroking my dragon. He had been separated from Toothless for a week and had been locked up in a cell and abused by everybody…including me, though I had forgiven him and he seemed to have forgiven me. He needed to get back to being Hiccup once more…and he could only do that once this damned Tribunal was done.

Finally, we headed back to the room and I felt some trepidation: I had trashed the place in my anger at his desertion and it was another thing I would have to own up to. He stopped me at the door, his forest green eyes wide and wary. "Astrid…I-I…" He was acutely embarrassed, battered and barefoot and dressed in the miserable T-shirt and sweat pants he had been in for the last week in the cells. With a small smile, I pushed the door open and pulled him in, shoving the door closed and wrapping my arms around him. And then I kissed him, feeling him hesitate, almost draw back…and then finally melt and kiss me as if his life depended on it. For a long moment, I was lost in his arms and then we had to break apart for air, breathing hard and nuzzling each other.

"Babe-there is no point you being released to my custody and sleeping anywhere else…” I told him, glancing around the room and realising they had tidied it up. "I need you rested and ready because tomorrow, I am going to dismantle your father." His eyes popped wide open.

"May not be that easy," he murmured despondently. "He's the General. He's been doing this for far longer than I've been alive. He's the legendary Stoick 'the Vast' asshole Haddock. And he is in charge of the Tribunal."

"Babe-I am Lieutenant Astrid 'don't mess the fuck with me' Hofferson, doctor, dragon Rider and your girlfriend…and I am in charge of blasting him to bits," I told him firmly. "And I know how to do this." For a moment he wavered…and then he gave that small, almost amazed smile that I sometimes saw when he seemed that somehow, despite every insecurity and blow he had taken mentally and physically in his life, he miraculously had such a fabulous girlfriend. He kissed me very tenderly on the lips.

"Then I even forgive you for not believing in me," he murmured gently, rubbing his nose against mine. I rested a hand on his battered cheek and winced at the hiss of pain.

"Sorry, babe," I murmured with genuine contrition and then pulled him to the shower room. "Freshen up…and then we can get some sleep…” He nodded, casting me one last, delighted look…and then he vanished to have a shower. I stared after him, then flipped my com on again.

"Gobber…Colonel, sir…” I began and I heard a chuckle.
"Whut is it, lassie?" he asked. "I tek it from the use of mae rank that I'm nae gonna like whut yuir asking for?"

"Um…doubt it," I admitted. "Gobber-I need full access to the details of the General's previous missions. All of them. And now." There was a pause.

"Ye know he's mae best friend?" he clarified.

"Yes…and I'm sorry, Gobber, but he's made this personal, between him and Hiccup," I explained softly. "There is no way Hiccup should've spent a week in jail…rather he should have been debriefed and sent to the infirmary and back to duty, maybe with a note or reprimand on his records. Instead, Stoick is determined to cashier him even when he isn't in the army and lock the boy up away from his dragon forever." There was a sigh.

"Ye dinnae have tae convince me, lass," he sighed heavily. "I wouldnae ha' believed it if I hadnae seen it with mae own eyes! The man's obsessed! And yuir right: anyone else would be dealt wuth as an operational field decision…but not Hiccup. I'll have the files sent tae yuir account immediately."

"Thanks, Gobber," I said, relieved as I heard the water turn off in the shower.

"And lassie? Ye dinnae have tae convince me. I'll listen tae muir arguments…but I willnae convict the boy unless Stoick has concrete proof that he deliberately planned to harm BERK. Okay?"

"Roger, Gobber. And…thanks."

"Give the laddie a hug from me!" Gobber said and closed the link as Hiccup emerged from the shower, damp and wrapped in a towel. I tossed him some fresh clothes and he quietly changed…then I led him to the bed. He managed a smirk.

"I knew it-you were after my body," he murmured and I stroked his face, watching him take his prosthesis off with a sigh of relief and then gently tucking him in before changing, grabbing my official tablet and sliding in beside him. He snuggled eagerly up to me, his arms wrapping around me and I carefully tucked him in my embrace. He gave a small, contented sigh, his eyes closing and head resting on my shoulder. "You know, the one thing I was dreaming about all the time we were apart was this, being in your arms," he told me sleepily. "It's the only place, apart from with Toothless, that I feel safe. And while I still can't believe you didn't realise that no matter what happens, I will always love you, I forgive you. I will always forgive you because you are everything, Mi….Astrid…"

"You can say it, Babe," I murmured, feeling his warmth seep into me. He snuggled a little closer, his face at peace.

"Milady," he breathed as sleep claimed him. And when I was sure he was safely asleep and safe and warm, I reached out an arm, grabbed my tablet and began to read…

oOo

The Tribunal was held in Seminar One, the largest space we had in the Base and used mostly for full briefings of all operational and support staff. They had set up a table at the front with three chairs-for the Tribunal members…and as I had guessed, they were the three senior officers-Gobber, Major Gothi and the General, who was the Chair of the Tribunal. There was a small table to one side with two chairs, for the accused-Hiccup-and his defence counsel-me. And there were a few chairs for any witnesses who wanted to observe proceedings.
So it was with shock that Stoick arrived, a scowl on his face, to find the room packed—all the Riders, pretty much all of IT—Hiccup’s old ‘gang’—most of medical, a lot of security and various representative from the veterinary and scientific and translation teams as well as two engineers from the workshops. Basically, the room was crammed with people from all areas of the base who had worked with Hiccup in his various roles and wanted to know why this unassuming and quiet young Rider was being so cruelly pursued and persecuted.

I found his hand and he squeezed, his face pale. There was no disguising the horrible lumps he had on his face and the anxiety in his green eyes, but I had made sure he was suited and booted, dressed in his ‘Base Commander’ outfit of black jeans, deep burgundy shirt and black waistcoat. I was in full uniform, my tablet and copious notes laid on the table. He managed a wan smile at my fierce expression.

"You look as if you're going into battle, Milady," he murmured.

"Too true, Commander Dragon Boy," I replied softly. His grip tightened.

"Um… may only be Private Dragon Boy now," he reminded me.

"You're my private Dragon Boy anyway!" I riposted with a grin and he leaned towards me, his eyes sparkling.

"Cut it out, you two!" Snotlout hissed from the front row and, with great reluctance, I pulled away.

"Later," I mouthed to him and he nodded, sitting back, still taut as a bowstring and breathing fast. He still felt in peril of his life but I wasn't going down without a fight…and besides, I had a killer blow up my sleeve. The General called the room to order.

"SILENCE!" he bellowed and even the twins sat in sudden silence. "This Tribunal is convened to judge on the charges of Treason laid against Commander Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third…"

"Oh Gods…" Hiccup muttered at my side, face-palming at the full embarrassing extent of his name.

"…that he did wilfully deny his duties and oaths to BERK by joining the enemies of this unit, he did betray our secrets, compromise our systems and attempt to destroy the Project and all within."

"OBJECTION!" I shouted and jumped to my feet, a sheath of papers in my hand. I had memorised everything, of course, but I always felt it looked better if I appeared to have notes…and besides, it did give me just an extra smidgeon of confidence that I had something to refer to if I lost my thread…or my rag. In fact, keeping my temper was likely to be the most challenging part of the whole process because I was utterly furious at the way the General had treated his son and I had to ensure I didn't surrender my advantage through anger. Stoick scowled at me.

"What?" he growled, angry at having his tirade interrupted before he could really get started on character-assassinating his only child.

"I have several objections that must be addressed prior to the continuation of this process," I stated firmly. Stoick went puce and forced himself to answer.

"Speak," he managed to choke out.

"Firstly, I do not believe this Tribunal has any jurisdiction," I stated icily. "Hiccup Haddock is a civilian and should be therefore tried on a civilian criminal court for any crimes—and that means the
local Scottish Judicial System. You should stop this process and apply via the local Sheriff to charge him with your charges. These will then be assessed by the prosecutors and if they reach the minimum standards for evidence, a criminal case will proceed."

"Rejected," Stoick said with cold satisfaction.

"Secondly, this process is actually incorrect," I told him flatly. His eyes widened in shock at my bold assertion. "BERK is the Biological EUROPEAN Resource for Counter-terrorism. Emphasis on European. You cannot use US code of justice here since this is governed by the European Defence Force codes of military justice. And since via reciprocal agreement 2004/923 any action or base on an allied territory i.e. the United Kingdom will be governed by the local military regulations. So this Tribunal is illegitimate and any military justice should be conducted under the 2006 Armed Forces Act-meaning a Judge and a panel of three to seven commissioned officers."

"I reject your assertion!" Stoick growled. My fist clenched.

"Thirdly, you are not fit to be on this panel, let alone chair it!" I announced loudly.

"Lieutenant-think about your next words before you speak them if you want to have a future in the army!" he threatened me and I smiled, turning to look at the audience as well as at the Tribunal.

"Precisely my point!" I commented. "I raise two entirely valid objections, both of which are factually and legally correct and they are illegitimately rejected out of hand by this man…because he is not objective in this case. And as such, he is precluded from participating in this process. The Tribunal HAVE to be impartial—that is also written into US codes of justice. If Stoick does not recuse himself, I will have to prove my assertion!"

Gobber was shaking his head and Gothi face-palmed as the General lurched to his feet.

"How dare you make that accusation?" he roared. I turned to my tablet, stared at the security clip I had pulled up and tapped it with my finger. The huge screen behind the Tribunal displayed Stoick streaming into his son's cell, shouting at the young man who was backing away…and then punching him without any provocation, over and over. And Hiccup never raised a finger, merely hanging limply as his vastly more powerful father beat him bloody. I froze the image, Stoick's meaty fist cocked back over Hiccup's bloody form and stared at him. I could feel my eyes tighten, my mouth twist in anger at the scene and I could hear intakes of breath and the silent, uncomfortable shuffling of feet of people embarrassed at someone they respected suddenly developing feet of clay.

"Sir, all your records speak highly of you, of a commanding officer respected…yes, and loved…by his subordinates," I said clearly. "But the man in that cell is not a man respected or loved by his subordinate. The man in that cell is a bully, a coward, a vicious cruel martinet who victimises and abuses a young man who isn't even a trained soldier yet who has been forced to be part of this unit and assume command without the proper training or support. That man is a soldier with unresolved and profound psychological issues stemming from the assassination of his wife by Drago Bludvist which he irrationally persists in blaming on his three year old son who was a passenger in the car at the time. Valka Haddock died outright and little Hiccup was critically injured…but survived."

I stabbed my tablet again and the recording—and what limited video there was—from Hiccup's com during our captivity after our kidnapping flashed up…

"Your father has been on my tail for years. He pushed too hard—and I pushed back. I missed you before—now I finally have you." The deep, growling voice was familiar: Drago. Stoick's fists tightened and the slanted image of the screen displayed the sallow, scarred face with the beard and
dreadlocks. The image moved slightly.

"M-missed me before?" Hiccup hoarse voice croaked. Gods, he sounded rough and I recalled how badly he had been beaten then…all to protect me. The man laughed cruelly.

"Yes-the day I killed your mother," Drago Bludvist scorned him.

"My-my mother?" Hiccup murmured. "She-she died in a car wreck." The man on the screen leaned closer and roared with laughter, the dark sound echoing furiously through the room.

"And how did that wreck happen?" he sneered. "Your father was harrying my operations and I had to distract him, take him off the case. So my men ran your car off the road. I aimed to kill you both but only your mother died. No matter—it achieved the aim. He was replaced and his successor was a man with fewer morals and a blinder eye."

"You killed my mother as a distraction?" Hiccup shouted. The man in the screen stopped laughing and his dead black eyes seemed to inspect the unseen prisoner like a nasty insect. "You ruined my life-as a distraction? Are you some kind of fucking psychopath?"

The image jolted as the sound of a blow filled the room. Hiccup grunted as the man began to chuckle at the battered, defiant shape. "Yes, I believe that I am," he growled and narrowed his dead eyes. "But you…you hate him, don't you?"

There was a long, pregnant pause.

"Join me," Drago invited him and the image shivered for a moment.

"Go fuck yourself!" Hiccup said in a level voice. The image jolted with another blow, another grunt of pain and blood sprayed across the image for a second. "I will never join you."

"That was foolish," Drago growled. "I was willing to let you live but now…Stoick will have to watch his little runt die slow and painfully…” Hiccup gave a brief, sarcastic laugh.

"Better check he'll even take the call," he gasped. "He doesn't give a fuck for me. He never has. So you may be wasting your efforts, whoever you are!" The man slammed his fist down on an unseen table, the crash reverberating through the room.

"You will learn to fear me, boy!" he roared.

"Kinda hard when I've no idea who you are!" Hiccup shot back painfully. "And bad luck! You won't get Stoick to even notice I'm gone!"

"I AM BLUDVIST!" the man roared, the sound echoing through the room and leaving sudden silence.

"Sorry—is that a name or a medical condition?" he taunted. The man was visibly shaking in rage and the image jerked for the last time.

"I will contact your father, boy—and believe me, he WILL accept the call. And then he can watch as we dismember you, piece by bloody piece!"

I stared at Stoick. He had clearly never seen the footage, never seen his son threatened and shocked by the truth of his mother's death, never believed Hiccup's assertion it hadn't been his fault…and he had never heard such a blunt and cold assessment of their relationship. To hear your only son shout to your worst enemy that you really didn't care whether your own offspring lived or died hit him
like a sledgehammer. And Hiccup's brave rejection of Drago's offer, despite clearly been pinioned and abused during the interview was another blow: it was difficult to convince anyone that Hiccup was a coward when the evidence to the contrary was on the screen. I swiped my finger across the screen once more and we were back in the cell...though this time, he was talking to the angry me...

"They had me. They had Toothless. They had you. And there was I, knowing that they would hand Toothless and me to Drago in a heartbeat and he would kill me. He swore...he swore he would murder me slowly and painfully when I escaped last time..." Hiccup was visibly trembling now, his voice ashamed. "And I really didn't want to die. So-so the only plan I could come up with was to-to surrender and beg to join them. Because I-I hoped that if I was with them, it would spare me being handed to Drago's torturers." He closed his eyes and hunched up again, once more hugging his knees to his chest.

"Okay. You joined them," I said coldly. I cringed at my own cruel treatment of him and vowed to apologise again. "But what you did..."

"I saved your life!" he said suddenly, his eyes abruptly locking with mine.

"You hunted me! You rejected me. And when you had a chance to explain...you just made it worse!" I shouted at him. He scrambled up.

"They were monitoring me!" he blurted out. "They monitored us both. If I had told you what I was doing, they would have heard and realised what you meant to me and they would never have let you go."

"And what do I mean to you?" I asked him coldly. He stared at me in shock, as if I had spat in his face. He was breathing hard, his entire body tense.

"Everything," he said softly. "You mean everything-you and Toothless. And-and they were never g-going to let him go...and I could never leave him. They would just use him, like a weapon..." His voice was thick with emotion and he blinked several times. "But...I knew if I persuaded them that you didn't mean anything to me, then they'd be happier to dispose of you instead of keeping you as a hostage against me. And...Ryker wanted to rape you, Astrid-and he would have done if you'd stayed. The hunt was the only thing I could come up with to stop him...and I know it was horrible and I was scared they would reach you before I could but it was literally the only idea I had."

The image shifted to Hiccup, back at the mercy of his father, backing away, his green eyes wary and hurt. He swallowed and spoke quietly.

"There was no hope in being captured again, no point in being beaten to a pulp for the nth time and lying in a cell until I got handed to Drago to be executed for the crime of being your son. I made a command decision to do what I could to get Astrid and Toothless away...and maybe find out something useful." Stoick's fists clenched and he loomed over the skinny, battered shape.

"So you surrendered because you were a coward and hoped you could find some intelligence to save your worthless life!" the General growled.

"Um...probably wouldn't have put it like that..." Hiccup protested quickly but Stoick leaned closer and shouted in his face.

"YOU SHAME ME!" And his son flinched as if he had been struck...and then the image switched to later in the conversation...

"I know exactly where I am and what I'm facing. I know that my father dragged me into a secret
The room watched the image of Stoick punch him again, his face red and twisted with real hatred at the man facing him…and then the image fast-forwarded again, to the very bloody and concussed Hiccup, hanging limply from his father's grasp, his swollen lips moving in a desperate plea…

"Dad…please…" he begged softly. "I had to try something else because they would get Toothless and Astrid and I would be killed. I'm not a soldier, Dad. I never signed up to die in defence of the country or the world or anything like that. I'm a computer geek and a dragon rider! I can only do what I think is right to try to protect the people I love. I never betrayed anything."

"YOU BETRAYED ME!" Stoick shouted at him, ignoring his son's visible flinch. "You betrayed my reputation! You betrayed my honour! You betrayed every hour I have spent in the service of our country, fighting to protect us from obvious and unseen threats to our way of life! You betrayed our forebears and our distinguished history of service and dedication! And you betrayed me because I thought you were behaving like the son I had hoped for—a proper, courageous, effective soldier!"

"So I wasn't the person who matched up to your impossible ideal," Hiccup replied despondently. "I was just who I am…I was just the person who got Astrid and Stormfly and Toothless and the Terrors and myself out of their hands along with another dragon egg, the location of Drago's nest and a baby Night Fury. Sorry. I can't be a dream…I can only be Hiccup…"

"You have shamed me for the last time…" Stoick snarled to the slumped shape, pressed back against the bars and staring hopelessly up at the implacable shape of his father. He had failed to acknowledge the amazing feats his son had achieved. "You will face the Tribunal for your fate. But know this: as of now, you are not a Haddock. YOU ARE NOT MY SON!"

"And there we reach the truth!" I announced, feeling my cheeks scorch with shame at displaying their private traumas to the Base—I only hoped Hiccup would forgive me one day. "This isn't about Hiccup's pretty distinguished record of service—despite not even being in the military! This is about the relationship between a General and his son, a relationship that couldn't be more toxic and is rooted in the General's irrational blame of his son for the murder of his wife by an enemy of the General's. So-by that warped reasoning—the man responsible for the death of his wife and the near-death of his son…is Stoick Haddock!"

Gobber closed his eyes and rested his head in his hands.

"He betrayed BERK!" Stoick shouted wildly.

"When?" I demanded. "Give examples!"

"The system was penetrated…" he began and I burst out laughing, along with all the IT staff.

"Sir, Hiccup could have crippled us and left us for dead, locked in the mountain with no air, heating
or way of escaping if he desired," I told him scornfully. "He built this system. He skirted round the
edges to give the appearance of hacking us…and then activated the Ragnarok Protocol that
devastated Drago's own system, permitted Hiccup to ream their databases and send us the Intel
without any record of the email to us remaining. He did not betray anything of us to them! the only
person he betrayed…was himself…" I stole a glance at Hiccup, who had been sitting quietly
throughout the whole thing so far and he looked up at me, as if feeling my worried gaze. He
nodded slightly.

"Um…Drago was really really unhappy that his system crashed and he was basically locked in for
three hours in his office with me…" he admitted, wincing. Gobber and Gothi shared a glance and
then looked at Stoick.

"Sir…there are many instances where you have granted field prerogative to officers when in
danger to take independent action in order to remediate the situation or protect the lives of the
team," I told him and he gave a sneer.

"Give examples!" he mocked me. I lifted my sheath of papers and stared directly into his face.

"Nicaragua, 1991. You allowed a Lieutenant Gamlesh to take his team off grid and remain in radio
darkness for 72 hours while they extracted themselves from an ambush behind the lines of an
especially brutal drug cartel, killing several cartel members and civilians against expression
mission parameters in the process." His eyebrows shot up: that mission had been very classified.
"Zaire, 1994. You permitted Captain Clancy Williams field discretion to proceed with the
assassination of a local military commander who threatened the success of your overall mission
without reference to the mission director or plan. Kuwait, 1996. You permitted Lieutenant Fagin to
penetrate a local Tribal meeting undercover with specialist operative Youssry El-Zattar who was
permitted to appear to change sides and 'join' them against mission orders. In gaining their trust he
was able to feed valuable information to the mission command which prewarned our forces of an
impending uprising. Iraq 2003…"

"ENOUGH!" Stoick shouted, his face beet-red. Scornfully, I tossed a thick pile of papers onto the
desk, hitting with a thud.

"I can provide a dozen more examples of where you have supported your officers in the field,
making unorthodox or frankly insubordinate decisions which were ultimately advantageous to the
overall mission success," I accused him coldly. "Yet instead of granting such latitude to a
commander who has proven his innovation and courage in the field over a host of previous
missions, you accuse him of treason and beat him up in the cells. I can provide testimony from
every single Rider here of your unreasonable and savage undermining of your Commander for no
reason-except that he is your son."

I turned to the room, seeing the eyes watching me, all stunned by the turn of events. "You see all
these people here, sir? Your 'worthless' 'useless' 'disgrace of a son' has interacted positively with all
of them…in the Team, in the IT division he is helping to run since the murder of his superior by
your brother, in the Veterinary division where he helps gather data on draconic physiology, in the
mechanics labs where he helps vehicle maintenance and works on prostheses for himself and his
dragon, in the Archives Division where his ability to read Old Norse and to process the images of
faded documents is invaluable! He is one of the most valued members of this unit…and with
respect, sir…if we only have to keep one Haddock, it will be the Rider, not the General!"

"ENOUGH!" Stoick yelled at me and I stiffened…but Hiccup's hand found mine and he faced his
father with resignation.

"I'm sorry Mom died," he said quietly, "but I was still alive. You didn't even want me from the
hospital. Instead of cherishing what you had left of your wife, you rejected it and blamed me for her death instead. And I can't do that any more…"

"General, I recommend that you be removed from this Tribunal and from Command of this Base, pending enquiry by an external panel from the oversight Council of BERK," I said levelly. "I move that the charges against Hiccup Haddock be dropped. I am sorry, sir…but BERK is more important than your unresolved psychological issues…which is why I also recommend an intensive course of psychotherapy to work through your unresolved grief issues."

He stared at me and suddenly in this cold grey-green eyes there was a sadness.

"Maybe…maybe you're right," he murmured. Almost shaking in shock, I looked at Gobber.

"Lassie, dinnae look at me!" he protested.

"You're the most senior officer after the General," I reminded him.

"Thor," he muttered then turned to Gothi. "That makes you my second-in-command!" he grinned. Her gesture was indescribable.

"And ye, lassie. What is yuir verdict?" he asked me.

"Er, Gobber…I can't be on the Tribunal…I'm involved with Hiccup and not impartial…" I reminded him, my hand still in his.

"But you can be for the General!" Gobber smirked triumphantly. Stealing a glance at Hiccup, I nodded reluctantly.

"I just made my recommendation," I reminded him softly. "Sorry, sir…but you need help and Hiccup needs to be allowed to be the amazing person he is without persecution and prejudice!"

Sober rose and looked sadly at his friend as Stoick drew back his shoulders and nodded once.

"The Tribunal finds the charges against Commander Hiccup Haddock unsustainable and they are dismissed," he announced. "However General Stoick Haddock is forthwith removed from his post for gross misconduct, with immediate effect. He is confined to quarters, all access is rescinded and he will be shipped out as soon as possible to a suitable facility for investigation and the psychological evaluation and support he so clearly needs-as mandated by the Medical and Deputy Medical Officers!" I flushed: I had never thought of myself in those terms.

"Colonel Gobber Belch will be acting Base Commander until the oversight Council appoints a successor to General Haddock," Gothi added in her mechanical voice. "My personal observations and recommendations will be sent with the full video recording of this Tribunal." She paused. "I also recommend that a commendation be placed on Lieutenant Hofferson's records for the most impressive piece of legal work I have ever seen." I flushed as Hiccup pulled me close and kissed me gently on the cheek.

"I'm very proud of you," he murmured. "I think you saved my life…"

"Then I only owe you about ten now!" I whispered back.

"TRIBUNAL ADJOURNED!" Gobber announced and collapsed into his seat as Stoick was led away. Hiccup paused, then grasped my waist and swung me round, a smile of relief lighting his face, his green eyes sparkling.
"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" he gasped, laughing. Disorientated, I grabbed his shoulders to steady myself-and found his lips on mine as we spun to a halt, lost in a moment. It was only the sounds of clapping and raucous whistling (thank you, twins!) that dragged us back to the present and most of us watching us basically making out.

"You're welcome, my Dragon Boy," I murmured, my cheeks on fire. His eyes stared deep into mine, the green depths finally free of despair.

"I love you, Milady," he sighed. I stole a small kiss.

"I love you too," I said. "Now let's get back to the dragons!"
Fifty-Three: Lover or Fighter?

Stoick was shipped out two days later and Gobber, Hiccup and I watched him leave. I felt a pang of regret because he was a great man and had served with distinction for so many years but there was something fundamentally wrong with the way he behaved towards his son that was skewing his behaviour in BERK and jeopardising the safety of the Base and the mission. I just hoped the Board of Enquiry would be lenient-as Stoick had not been-and grant him the psychological support and therapy he so clearly needed. I knew Hiccup was devastated that his father didn't even spare him a glance as he was escorted from BERK and I had felt him trembling through the hand grasping mine. But there was nothing I could do except be there for the man I loved because Stoick would have to reach his own resolution with his son.

Gobber was incredibly grumpy at being in charge and made sure he dumped copious amounts of his work on Hiccup and I, which made for interesting days. I still insisted on putting in daily shifts five days a week with Gothi because, though I was accruing all sorts of experience as an officer, I still desperately needed my experience as a doctor. Lucky for me, it was winter and chest infections were rife so I zipped through my respiratory modules with ease, though I found out why Snotlout was called Snotlout when he was in with a bad cold. Bleurgh!

We had been told that the Oversight Council would send us another General in the near future to replace Stoick and I knew that Gobber would find it really hard, no longer having his friend as his boss. And I knew he was feeling guilty for turning on him in the Tribunal, even though he had no option. He had politely declined to talk about it when I offered and had just gotten quietly (for him) drunk. This, of course, meant him singing 'I'm a Viking Through and Through' at the top of his voice horribly off-key for HOURS until he passed out.

Drago had been quiet for a while, which made us all worried. Nothing the IT team could find gave us any clues what he was planning next and the Grimborns' submarine didn't leave Veidimadurinnfloi once it moored there. I just hoped they hadn't taken all the eggs but Hiccup reassured me that their only thought would have been escape and mending their damaged craft before the Russian Navy arrived. He had ordered 24/7 satellite surveillance of Drago's Complex, the Grimborns and constant monitoring of any filed flight plans for Drago Bludvist.

Hiccup and I rode every morning and evening and trained with the others in between. Myrkr's wing was healing nicely and the Vets were impressed at the job Hiccup had done with her. He explained that Toothless had licked her wounds vigorously and he suspected that Night Fury saliva had some pretty special healing properties. The Vets had responded by gathering gallons of the sticky stuff and beginning a series of experiments with the science team. Meanwhile, I had been taking Hiccup down the range to improve his shooting and had run him through some basic unarmed combats moves…because there was one memory that I needed to exorcise before he could move on and we could face our new commander without any issues.

"I think we need to get out for a while," I told him one evening, a couple of days before the new General was due to arrive. My hand automatically found his and I couldn't help smiling at the gentle curl of his fingers around mine. He turned to me, his gentle forest green gaze meeting mine. His face quirked in a teasing smile.

"Not another social appointment, Milady?" he smiled, referring to the somewhat lacking success of our previous attempts at dating. I pushed my body forward, pressing against his lean shape and
staring up into his angular face.

"No guns this time," I promised him and he grinned, his lopsided smile warming his face.

"Oh, good-at least I stand a fair chance of not getting shot…though kidnapping remains a possibility," he smirked.

"Well, it is my turn…" I reminded him and my face hardened slightly. "And I want to go to one specific place…that pub…" He stiffened and his eyes held a mute plea.

"Astrid…" he murmured, his voice soft but I wasn't being dissuaded.

"Hiccup…those people beat you up really badly," I reminded him sharply. "And they thought it was okay."

"I sorta went looking for trouble because I hoped they would beat me up…" he admitted and I caught his face between my hands, forcing him to look at me.

"My love, you didn't deserve anything like that and they wouldn't have given you that kicking unless they decided they wanted to pick on an easy target…"

"And you're saying I'm an easy target?" he asked me in a mock-hurt voice.

"Not a fighter…and especially not a close combat unarmed specialist," I told him gently. "And those people…and there were several of them, weren't there?" He nodded quietly. "They could see that. They beat you up for fun, babe. And I am not tolerating that." My voice had dropped and there was anger there because I was furious. He gently caught my arms and stared into my eyes.

"You realise this won't help my self-esteem?" he asked me and I frowned.

"My love-you have saved me so many times, taught me so much…given me so much…you are clever and inventive and brave but I am the soldier and I won't let this pass," I told him firmly. He leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead.

"It was pretty horrible," he admitted. "And brought back…too many memories…" He leaned forward to rest his head against mine. "Besides, I was pretty dazed last time I saw you in action…and even then, you were pretty awesome…" I swatted his chest lightly.

"C'mon, Commander Dragon Boy," I invited him. "We may just get a quiet meal out…" He wrapped his arm around my waist as we headed for the dragons.

"Fat chance!" he said.

The fifty mile flight wasn't that long because the dragons are really fast and within twenty minutes, we were swooping in the twilight and coming in low behind the little village. We had both worn our flight helmets—even though Hiccup frequently flew without his—because it made conversation much easier and when we landed, I was exhilarated, not just at the prospect of seeing what had happened to my boyfriend but also, just possibly, having another date with him. We landed and asked the dragons to remain out of sight but close by and with a little croon, they agreed, eyes shining eerily in the gloom as Hiccup straightened up and took my hand.

"Ready?" he asked in a low voice, his green gaze seeking confirmation but I grinned.

"Anywhere with you, babe," I reassured him. He had made an effort, trying to tame his wild auburn hair with moderate success, his green eyes sparkling and he had shaved. I smiled: he had put on a
deep burgundy shirt I had bought him under his battered leather jacket with skinny black jeans and boots. I was in a pale aqua silk blouse with jeans, sketchers and my own brown leather jacket.

"You're beautiful," he breathed, ghosting a kiss on my cheek and I smiled, dipping my head as he headed into the pub. I glanced up at the sign: the Crown and Unicorn, a good old traditional name but the sign was peeling and the license sign was crooked. The building was a traditional granite building with warm light seeping between the curtains. It was warm and there was a hubbub that diminished as we walked in and headed for the bar. I smiled brightly at the surly looking barman and leaned on the bar.

"Evening!" I said cheerfully. "Two halves, please?" He gave a curt nod and moved to the nearest tap, starting to pull the half-pints. Hiccup settled at my side, his keen gaze sweeping over the room. The hubbub had resumed though there was a watchful air and I was conscious of the eyes on us. The publican handed over our drinks and relieved me of a reasonable amount of money and then I grabbed the menu and followed Hiccup to a small table at the far side of the room. It was a moderate sized room with flagged floor, a mismatched assortment of wooden tables and a selection of nineteenth century prints on the dark green walls. A television in the corner was playing a match from the Scottish Premier League and most eyes were on the football. I shrugged my jacket off and sipped my drink, glancing at Hiccup, who was taut as a bowstring.

"Over there," he murmured, inclining his head to a table not far from the television and four hefty men, all greying hair and scruffy clothes except one, who was bald. Their table was heavily laden with spent pint glasses and a young woman wandered across to clean them up and deliver another large order of whiskies and beers. There were jeers and one of the men—with a heavy beer gut—pinched at her behind. She slapped him and gave him a mouthful of expletives as we watched.

"Charming," I commented, studying the menu. Hiccup ducked his head and glanced over to me. "How the Hell did you manage to get mixed up with them?" He sipped his beer and ran a hand nervously through his hair.

"Um…I was sitting at the bar, drinking when they came up and started picking on me," he murmured in an embarrassed voice. "My accent gave me away and they just kept insulting me until I turned round…and I think I said something back and then the first punch landed and…well, you saw the end result…" I slid my hand over to his and gave a small smile.

"Babe—assholes are the same everywhere…sadly…but maybe these guys will just keep to themselves," I suggested, hating the note of embarrassment and shame in his voice.

"And if they don't?" he asked, his eyes flicking up to inspect my face. There was quiet pride in his voice.

"Babe—I will kick their fat asses!" I assured him and rose to go and order the food: this was my date and my treat so I made sure we had a decent meal. Then I came back with a wooden spoon with a number on it-signifying our order number—and a couple of sets of cutlery. "So, Dragon Boy…what do you do when you're not flying, computing and getting into all sorts of trouble?" He smiled thinly.

"You've already seen," he said self-consciously. "I draw." Frowning, my mind floated back to the pencil sketch of me framed over his desk—and the charcoal image of Toothless. They were superb: he was really talented. "Um, yeah…" he added, misinterpreting my frown and I shook my head urgently.

"You know, you are really good?" I asked him and his eyes flicked up, inspecting me in shock. "That picture you drew of me was fantastic, babe! And maybe when it gets warmer, we can go out
for a picnic and you can draw me something!"

"Draw you something?" he echoed, a small smile lifting his face. "Hmm…maybe my beautiful, ferocious girlfriend…" I opened my mouth to reply when we heard footsteps and looked up…to see the four bulky men who Hiccup had picked out standing behind him.

"Well, look who's back?" one said, his soft Highland accent not disguising the menace in his words.

"And it looks like he's got himself a protector!" the man with the beer-gut and the busy hands sneered. His accent was broad Glaswegian and he gave a nasty leer at Hiccup. I could see his shoulders tighten and he stared without moving at the table. "Stick insect-ye got a wee lassie ter protect ye?"

His knuckles whitened against his fists and I read his anger and alarm at having men stand behind him: I realised that the situation was bringing back all sorts of bad memories of BERK. Anxiety curling in my gut, I stared up at the men who were laughing at him.

"We don't like you yanks, comin' up here and buying our homes and hotels!" another sneered: he had pock-marked skin and sagging jowls.

"Boy, my father will think he's really paying me far too much if I'm buying hotels out of my allowance," Hiccup murmured, his dry voice carrying to me.

"What was that, skinny?" Beer-gut sneered and shoved Hiccup's shoulder. Watching them, I uncrossed my legs and slid my feet flat on the floor, leaning slightly to get my weight forward on the balls of my feet. I sipped my beer and saw Hiccup slowly raise his face.

"Would you mind letting my friend and I finish our drinks? I promise not to buy any more hotels while I'm sitting here," he said, craning his neck to inspect them.

"Ye sarky wee bastard…"

"Excuse me-would you mind going away? We're trying to have a quiet pint and I really don't see what it's got to do with you!" I said calmly. They turned to me.

"Mouthy cow, aren't yer?" the first man threatened. "No one asked you, bitch!"

"Don't speak to her like that!" Hiccup ground out through his teeth.

"Ooh! Look who's grown a spine!" the fourth man-a squat, ugly bald man with copious tattoos on his arms. I glanced over to the publican, knowing it was his responsibility to intervene: he studiously looked the other way and pointedly walked to wipe the far end of the bar.

"Okay, Milady-we'll go," Hiccup said with forced calm. "We don't want trouble." I watched him: this was the responsible Commander speaking, trying to avoid conflict not because he feared being beaten up or the embarrassment of walking away from being abused and shamed but because he guessed what I would do. He'd read my personnel file, after all. I nodded.

"Okay, babe," I said quietly and made to rise but a heavy hand landed on Hiccup's shoulder.

"Not it's not…babe…" Beer-gut sneered, leaning close. I felt anger begin to rise in my chest: we were being incredibly reasonable and trying to avoid confrontation but these idiots seem hell-bent on picking on my boyfriend. And though I had wanted to come here because I wanted to address the final part of that damaging episode and let him move on, it looked like these people wanted a
replay.

Only this time, there would be a different ending.

"Get your hands off me," Hiccup growled.

"Or what, fishbone?" Baldy asked, cracking his fists. "Looks like yer girl will be a lot of fun…"
And then I felt it: my face hardened and my fists clenched-as Hiccup shoved them away and spun to face them: he was taller than all of them, though half as wide. But I knew-as they did not-that he was stronger than he looked because holding onto a dragon in flight-especially at the speeds Toothless travelled-required strength.

"Apologise…" Hiccup growled. Jowly stabbed him in the chest with a thick, calloused finger.

"Or what, you skinny streak of piss?" he scoffed.

Hiccup punched him straight in the face, putting all his weight, anger and frustration into the blow. The man staggered back, his eyes popping in shock. Beer-gut instantly punched Hiccup and he slammed back onto the table, spilling our drinks. I was already up as the first softly-spoken man made to punch my boyfriend-and I grabbed his clenched fist, digging my fingers hard into the pressure point and twisting, drawing a scream from the man as he collapsed to his knees, whimpering. Beer-gut roared and punched at me but I ducked back, cheerfully watching him punch his friend out.

With a bellow, Jowly lunged at me and I spun under the swiping arm, grabbing the wrist as it passed and slamming the arm down onto my knee, dislocating the elbow. The man yowled, clutching at the injury as Hiccup kicked out at Baldy and followed it up with a brace of punches, his form not bad. My efforts in starting trying to teach him some combat moves, some simple but useful manoeuvres to help protect him seemed to be paying off—even if he had thrown himself into the match to protect me! As I watched, he threw himself on top of Baldy and they rolled on the ground, trading blows. I inspected the other combatants, kicking Jowly across the face to render him unconscious and then turned to Beer-gut.

The man reeked, bad body odour and beer breath wafting at me as he leered over yellow teeth. His jowls were covered with uneven stubble and his clothes stained. I could see the finest of yellow tinges in his eyes and reckoned that he was a habitual, dependent drinker, seeking trouble and enjoying fights. And clearly the publican was a friend because no one would tolerate this otherwise. I circled sideways, watching his moves and calculating how to beat him. He might be heavier than me and far drunker, but I was deceptively strong and very extensively combat-trained.

"Once we've disposed of your boyfriend, mebbe we can have a little fun, lassie?" he sneered.

"In your dreams, you bag of shit!" I sneered, eyeing his movements, seeing the sweat on his lip and the faint tremor of his hands.

"You are gonna regret that, you mouthy bitch!" he threatened. "I'm gonna have you and you're gonna scream…" I stared at him, wondering what planet this drunken thug lived on—or what century he thought we were in? He seemed to think it was the nineteenth: I was certain I came from the twenty-first and I wasn't the helpless heroine from a romance novel.

"Not if I can help it," I growled, parrying a lunge at me and kicking him directly—and very hard—in the family jewels. He groaned and his face grew puce, but I was already spinning, my foot cracking into his jaw, breaking it. Giving a bubbling groan, the final kick flipped him back a yard and dumped him unconscious on the flagstones. Hiccup was pinned by the bald man, his lip and
cheek bleeding, though the man had a swollen eye and blood was streaming from his nose. His thick hands were tight around Hiccup's neck and my boyfriend was red in the face, his hands desperately trying to pry the thick fingers from his throat.

He was struggling silently, not calling, his concentrated emerald gaze fixed on the man in front of him, his strong, dexterous hands digging into the hands and slowly prying them off…and then I lost my cool, watching the bald man spit in his face. I lurched forward, my arm locking round his throat and instantly compressing his windpipe. He continued attempting to strangle Hiccup for another couple of seconds until he realised he was being expertly throttled himself and he suddenly threw himself backwards, trying to pin me, but I dodged and stood between him and my coughing boyfriend, in full fighting stance, my fists raised and eyes narrowed.

"Having fun yet?" I asked, watching him sneeze blood over his vest. He roared and lunged at me, but I blocked and landed punch after punch, kick after kick on his flabby drunken shape: my kickboxing instructor would have been proud! Staggering, he mumbled something at me and I glared and then finally, I punched him across the face, watching him fall like a felled tree.

Wincing and rubbing his bruised throat, Hiccup painfully levered himself to his feet and frowned at me, glancing around the carnage. "Remind me not to get you mad," he commented, grimacing. I grabbed a tissue and dabbed his split lip, frowning slightly.

"Hold this," I ordered him in my best 'doctor' voice before grabbing the spilled glasses and marching to the bar. Suddenly the publican began paying attention and he scowled at me.

"I'm afraid I'm gonna have tae ask ye tae leave!" he snarled. I slammed the glasses on the bar and smiled.

"No, you're not," I told him smoothly. "You're going to replace these-on the house-and deliver our food. Those drunks will be dumped outside and we will have a nice meal." His shook his head.

"It's mae pub and…"

"And if you wish to retain your license, I suggest you do what you're advised to," I said. "I'm sure the police will be interested in the fact you watched them assault us without intervening despite my appeal or making any attempt to calm the situation down. And I watched you serve a lot of alcoholic beverages to people who were obviously inebriated, which is a criminal offence."

"What're ye-some soort o' lawyer?" he sneered. Recalling my recent performance at the Tribunal, I was tempted to say 'yes,' but instead I just leaned closer.

"Worse. Army doctor," I growled. "So I can kick their asses and have your license removed for public health violations. My testimony about their state of intoxication will be extremely valid and credible. So two halves of mild and our meals…please. And get them out of here!" I pointed to the sprawled attackers then turned…to a round of applause from the other patrons.

"Well done!"

"Aye-that showed Jock and his cronies!"

"That Callum was always a bad'un!"

"Bring up those drinks, Gordie! The lass is right-those lads've med oor lives a misery these last months!"

"All reet!" the publican-I assumed he was called Gordie-conceded with bad grace and pulled us
some more pints. With a triumphant smile, I brought them back to our table and saw Hiccup already seated, grimacing and dabbing his bloody lip but his face brightened and he smiled as I sat opposite him and sipped my new drink.

"Should I start applauding now or just thank Thor you didn't punch me when I came back drunk?" he asked me with a proud smile but my face fell: I had hoped he would have forgotten that.

"Hiccup-I am so sorry," I apologised. "I really shouldn't have said that. Threatening you with that was so wrong…"

"But you wanted to come here to find out what happened…" he told me, his gentle words making me feel worse.

"I know you think I just came here to beat these guys up…"

"The thought had crossed my mind," he admitted wryly.

"Okay, I admit I was furious when you told me what happened…and coming here, I could see how it happened," I continued, "but I wanted you to come here so this wouldn't be something without resolution. Facing your fears…"

"Instead, you had to rescue me," he said in a quiet voice, gingerly touching the welt on his cheek. There was a very chagrinned look on his face.

"Babe-you punched him for insulting me!" I laughed. "And you got a couple of hits in pretty impressively. All you needed was more experience…and back-up…"

"Milady, all I need is you," he said honestly, smiling and then giving a wince as he pulled his split lip. I leaned over the table and kissed him and he was quick to lean into the kiss, breaking after a long moment. "Wow-that was worth it! I should get beaten up more often!"

"Don't you dare," I said, sitting back down but trailing an affectionate hand down his cheek before I grabbed my drink. "Six years of kickboxing, karate and army combat training, babe. I can't fly anywhere near as well as you but I kick ass relatively efficiently."

"I'll remember that for your next personnel evaluation," he smiled, his dry humour reassuring. "Gods, I'm glad my father wasn't here to see me…" Though his voice was infinitely sad as he said the words.

"..go for a man twice your size and punch him really well!" I interrupted as our meals arrived. I had the scampi, he had a pie and a huge pile of chips and he tucked in ravenously. I found myself grinning: he was talking about the latest modification to Toothless's tail which he had imagined and was testing. He admitted he had stolen a couple of hours here and there from Base Commander duties to upgrade the tail and create some new components. The way his green eyes sparkled as he spoke of creating the tail, of giving Toothless some independent gliding capability made me just want to smile. He was amazing, inventive, creative and determined…and the tragic fact was that his father had no clue what an amazing person his son was.

We finished with coffee and then got up together, hands immediately finding each other. He helped me into my jacket and held the door for me as we walked into the dark. His arm slid round my waist and I stared up into his face, seeing him about to speak-then freeze. His eyes flicked to the right and I heard the sounds of steps approach and several sets of breathing. Instantly he pushed me behind him and faced half a dozen men…the four we had seen earlier-plus friends。

"Okay, yank-yrer picked the wrong place ter throw yer weight around!" Baldy snarled and Hiccup
sighed, raising his fists and shrugging his lanky, lean shape.

"Strangely, never been accused of that one before," he replied. "Why d'you think this will go any differently this time?"

There was the snikt of a knife flicking open and light gleamed off the edge. I backed away a step and fumbled in my handbag for my trank gun— which I never travelled without. Hiccup backed up a pace and narrowed his eyes, giving a low whistle.

"Ah," he said quietly and nailed them with a piercing look. "So scared of a girl and a skinny American fishbone that you have to bring another three guys and a knife? How pathetic are you?"

"Yer girl is gonna give us a lotta fun—once we've done with you!" Jowly threatened.

"I doubt it," he said firmly, motioning me to move backwards. "But I think I'll bring a weapon as well…” And then I heard the growl, the slither of leather wings opening, the snikt of spines being readied and I smiled, putting my gun away. He smiled as the dragons appeared behind the men from out of the darkness. "I think it beats a knife!"

The men turned at Toothless's growl and Stormfly's hiss. There were dropped jaws and a blizzard of profanities as the men saw the monsters facing them. And then Baldy lunged at Toothless with the knife. There was a roar and the Night Fury head-butted the man aside, whacking him with his tail. Stormfly leapt forward, spinning and swiping another couple of men aside. Jowly ran at us and Hiccup threw himself at him, flattening him with a very accurate punch while I landed a couple of ferocious kicks on another. The dragons finished the other two off and then both gave satisfied croons.

As one, we ran forward and led the dragons away from the pub, in case the ruckus called any of the other patrons out. We both knew that no one would give any credence to the word of a group of angry drunks but if everyone saw the dragons, we could be in trouble. Out of sight, we swung into the saddle, pulled our helmets on and launched, arrowing up into the air.

"You realise Gobber will absolutely slaughter me for this?" he reminded me as we soared above the clouds, snatching glimpses of the brilliant stars and a faint smudge of greenish aurora to the far northern horizon.

"Hey, babe—say it was my idea," I offered, knowing the Colonel would have to face my own forthright brand of reasoning which I knew he would rather avoid.

"But it was mine," he admitted, his voice firmer. "Look, Astrid—I'll take the heat for my decisions. No one else saw us, there was no CCTV and the drunks are not credible witnesses. I'm sure my cell is still there in the brig…"

"Babe—ain't gonna happen," I told him firmly. "If he wants, he can put us in there together…”

"And have to deal with the twins without us," he smirked. I heard him chuckle. "You're evil, Milady."

"I try," I smiled back as we swooped through to the main entrance and landed in the garage. We quietly walked our dragons back to Pen Two and fed and unsaddled them, rewarding both with cod—though Stormfly accepted a chicken leg as well…and then we wandered back to our room. We were both giggling and imagining Gobber's face if he was contacted by local police about a dragon sighting and we collapsed into our room, lips crashing together and hands all over each other. I dug my fingers into his auburn hair and his slid down my back, pressing me against him, then sliding
one up and across my shoulder, fingers tracing the line of my neck.

"Gods, I love you," he murmured, the desire brilliant in his wide green eyes. His lips slid over my chin, ghosting over my neck and sucking at my throat, knowing I was really sensitive there.

"Babe..." I murmured, breathing hard. "I want you." He lifted his head, his eyes suddenly shocked and wary. He stilled and for a moment, he looked afraid and totally stunned.

"Me?"

"Only you, my love," I told him, pulling him close and kissing him hard, lips open and tongues battling. I felt him urgently pulling off my jacket and I ripped his off, hauling him towards the bed, fumbling at the buttons on his shirt. He stumbled and we more or less collapsed onto the bed, twined in each other's arms. He paused, staring into my eyes once more.

"Are you sure?" he asked, the flash of his horrible lack of self-confidence breaking my heart. I stared deep into his uncertain eyes and nodded urgently.

"Hiccup," I murmured gently. "Make love to me."
A little alone time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fifty-Four: A Little Alone Time.

Waking the next morning had been different. The earth hadn't quite moved but I was snuggled against Hiccup, his arm draped protectively across my body and there was a contented smile on his face. In fact, he looked happy as he lay there, an expression I hadn't really seen much on his face since we had met. I fidgeted a little closer, snuggling into his naked chest and his arm tightened around me, his chin resting on the top of my head. He was warm and solid and I felt safe. And the memory of our encounter just made me smile as well: he had been gentle and loving and utterly fantastic. I was completely in love with him.

"...mornin', Milady..." he murmured sleepily. He still sounded exhausted, though whether from the amazing previous night or the cumulative effect of everything he had gone through in the last couple of weeks, I wasn't sure. I burrowed my head against his chest and hummed in comfort.

"I think we may have to get up soon," I told him. He moved his arm slightly, snuggling me firmly.

"Just another hour or two," he pleaded sleepily. My alarm buzzed and I sighed, then pulled away from his warm embrace, slapping the dratted thing silent. He whined, snagged me and pulled me back into his embrace. "You wouldn't want a wounded man getting cold, would you?" he whined gently, his bleary emerald gaze focussing on me.

"Wounded?" I murmured, smiling. "Hmm...not sure a wounded man could do what you were up to last night..." He grinned and nuzzled his cheek against the top of my head.

"Um...were you...I mean...was it...?" I lifted my head and kissed him to stop him babbling.

"Babe-you were amazing..." I told him honestly and his eyes widened...and a surge of self-confidence warmed his expression. His lips lifted in a small smirk.

"Only for you," he murmured softly as I sighed, then sat up, dragging my nightshirt on and walking tiredly to the shower room. "Hey...what did I say...?" he protested softly.

"Babe-I need a shower and then we have to take those dragons flying," I sighed, knowing he really wasn't a natural morning person. He lay back, throwing his hands above his head, his head thrown back and eyes closed.

"You're right," he accepted as I vanished. "Wake me when you get out..."

I emerged about fifteen minutes later, still combing out my damp hair and he was snoring softly. I swiftly dressed and braided my hair, then walked over and stripped the blankets off him. He gave a little scream and clutched at them as cold air wafted over...everything. His eyes snapped open and he sat up, instinctively curling protectively and grabbing the blankets, clutching them desperately to his naked body and shielding himself from view. There was no whimsical joking now...he was suddenly panicking, terrified, his shoulders hunched, revealing the horrible scars on his back. I stiffened, shocked and overwhelmed by guilt: what had I done?

I stared at him, seeing his body tensed rigid in fear, his green eyes wide and dark with terror and
shame and his gaze shimmering with tears. And the words came back to me, making me wonder exactly what had happened…or more precisely, how it had happened…because I knew suddenly what I had reminded him of…

*I was sexually abused. Dagur…raped me…*

Quietly and slowly, I eased onto the bed and slid next to him, tentatively wrapping my arms around him. I leaned my head close to his, tears in my eyes. "I'm so sorry…" I whispered. "I-I didn't even think…" He curled up, his knees pulling up to his chest and face pressing down into them. His shoulders were shaking. He shook his head desolately, his breathing ragged.

"I don't deserve you," he whimpered. "I don't deserve any woman…" I hugged him tighter and burrowed my head into his shoulder.

"You're the only one who deserves me," I insisted, gently brushing a hand over his wild auburn hair, finger-combing it off his face and pressing my lips to his cheek. "My love, this was my fault. Not yours. I was thoughtless…and I am so, so sorry I hurt you…" Finally, he raised his head, shocked emerald eyes searching my face and his breathing calming. The moment he looked at me, I rested a hand on his cheek, forcing him to stare into my eyes. "I'm sorry," I whispered. His hand rose to stroke my cheek…then he very hesitantly leaned forward and kissed me.

"I should be sorry," he murmured. "I should get over it and…"

"No!" I started, my eyes wide in dismay. "Hiccup-if I said 'just get over it' to a woman who suffered what you did, I would be rightfully shouted down and called a heartless bitch! You're a human being who never asked for…for any of this…" My eyes were gleaming with tears and I felt wetness on my cheeks. "This was my fault…"

He kissed me again, firm and more confident than I had expected. My face was captured between his hands as he finally pulled back, his emerald eyes were calmer. "Milady, you could not have known…because you weren't there," he told me gently. "I…I am shy…not just because I've been teased forever as a fishbone, though I was…because when Dagur…they stripped me, all of them sneering at me, naked and exposed and begging them to stop, to…spare me." He paused and swallowed. "He didn't. And they left me there, naked and utterly shamed after he had done. And I…I never…" He paused and sighed. "But you never meant me any harm…and I do love you…"

"I should have thought," I sniffed. "I love you, Dragon Boy…and I never even thought I would upset you…"

"Dragon Boy?" he murmured, a faint smile lifting his lips. "Not sure if I should be happy or disappointed…"

"Dragon Man sounds like some sort of weird superhero," I admitted, swiping my eyes with my palms.

"And Dragon Boy doesn't?" he teased me softly. His bright forest green eyes were twinkling a little and I wondered how he could calm so easily after my carelessly stirring up his horrific memories. He leaned close, as if reading my eyes. "I'm in your arms, Milady. I will always be safe in your arms." I gave a shuddering sigh.

"I really don't deserve you," I told him as he kissed me more firmly, the kiss much more passionate as he gently pressed me into the bed. I stared up into his sparkling eyes. "We really should fly the dragons…" I murmured as he kissed me again.
"They can wait," he said.

When we finally headed down to breakfast somewhat later, he was smiling and there was a distinct aura of self-confidence. We walked hand-in-hand in our flight gear towards the mess for breakfast before we took our dragons out for a spin and I looked up into his face: he looked so ridiculously happy and his eyes lingered on me so lovingly that I knew it would take our colleagues approximately one second to guess what had happened-half that in the case of the twins. I groaned and he swept his amused green gaze to meet mine.

"Are you okay?" he asked me considerately and I rolled my eyes with a sigh.

"Yeah," I huffed. "Except…you really wear your heart on your sleeve, don't you, babe?" His brow furrowed. "How long d'you think it's gonna take the others to work out that we have…um…" A vaguely hurt look entered his glorious gaze.

"And you are ashamed?" he asked softly. I shook my head urgently and squeezed his hand reassuringly. The horrible lack of self-confidence was still there, bubbling under the surface, but I definitely preferred this new more confident Hiccup.

"Of course not!" I told him. "But while I am happy to brag about how good you were…I will kill you if you say anything about me to Tuff and Snotlout!" He suddenly looked alarmed.

"You really think they'll know?" he asked me, his tone a little panicked. I gave him a Really? look. "Oh Thor," he muttered. "What am I thinking? Of course they'll know…and there is zero chance they'll actually let it drop…" I shrugged.

"Maybe by Christmas…next year…" I grinned at his discomfort. He leaned forward and kissed my forehead.

"I shall just have to suffer for you," he sighed, adopting a martyred expression. I punched his shoulder lightly with a grin.

"Me too," I replied and pushed the door open. The other riders were there, munching toast and watching the twins have a food fight…though baked beans probably wasn't the wisest choice of weapon… I shared a look with Hiccup and we headed to the servery, grabbing breakfast and settling at the end of the table well away from flying food. Cami opened her mouth to ask me how I was when she saw Hiccup's bruises from the fight and the smile on his face…and her gaze swung to me. Her eyes asked a silent question and I gave a small nod with a larger smile. Hiccup stared at us and rolled his eyes.

"Thirty seconds…and you tell Cami," he sighed.

"Tell what?" Gustav asked loudly.

"Hey, who's telling Gustav what?" Snotlout asked.

"What's Gustav telling Snotlout?" Tuff asked suddenly, his face covered in orange baked bean sauce.

"What?" Fishlegs asked, looking up from his book.

"Hey, who's telling Tuff and not me?" Ruff asked. I was shaking my head frantically but Cami was just grinning triumphantly.
"I think…Commander Dragon Boy just broke his duck!" she grinned. Snotlout gave a confused look.

"What?" he asked. I heard a thud as Hiccup hit his head on the table.

"Guess!" Cami suggested, highly amused that Snotlout had no idea what the expression meant. The twins had started quacking and were speculating about some kind of bathroom mishap…or perhaps serious adverse incident with a waterfowl. Eret sighed: he could guess and stole a look at the groaning Hiccup. My boyfriend face-palmed, heard Gustav suggest that perhaps some form of avian bestiality had happened and looked in exasperation at me. I met Eret's eye and he shrugged: he was at least behaving like an adult but he did wink at me and I flushed. I sipped my coffee thoughtfully as Hiccup abruptly sat up, grabbed two slices of toast, shoved his bacon, eggs, tomato and hash brown between the two and stood up.

"I'm going flying!" he announced and winked at me, then scooted from the room, hanging onto the huge and overfilled sandwich. I rapidly constructed a bacon sandwich.

"Me too," I said and sprinted out after him, catching him on the stairs. "Oh no-you aren't leaving me with those lunatics!" I told him as we zipped down to Pen level. He smirked, chewing.

"Actually, I knew you would follow, Milady," he smiled and slowed to allow me to walk alongside. "Sorry-I really couldn't face Snot just now. I know he's much better than he was…but then there were the twins…"

"Well, I have to face Ruff and Cami," I told him pointedly. "And they'll want details!"

"Oh Thor…" he sighed.

"So…my Dragon Boy…what do you want me to tell them?" I smirked at him.

"I suppose nothing is out of the question?" he asked hopefully, his green eyes pleading with me. I chewed on my sandwich and shook my head.

"Not an option," I said regretfully, knowing the girls. "So what should I say? Lanky, thoughtful, tender, ginger…"

"Not ginger!" he told me firmly. I grinned: he was so easy to tease and he hated being called ginger.

"Mine," I said firmly and nudged against him. He nearly dropped his sandwich as we walked along the passageway to Pen One silently finishing breakfast. I now knew what had happened down here and I was impressed that he had traversed this way at least once a day to see Toothless despite the anxiety this journey must have provoked. It was, when you thought about it, pretty isolated and a long way from help…as I had found out when I was shot with the Aurisdraconis darts. My hand found his and tightened causing him to look down at me. Immediately, his warm grasp closed on mine and I smiled up at him.

"You okay?" he murmured, I nodded.

"It's a long way from the main base," I murmured and he leaned over, pressing his lips to my hair.

"I'm here," he reassured me. "And if we're attacked, there is a one-touch pen release to get Toothless out…" I stared into his face. "Gobber arranged it for me after…well…" His grip tightened but he forced a small smile onto his lips. "Dagur is dead," he reminded me. "And I am with you." I mused on this as we arrived at the Pen and signed in, then prepped the dragons.
"When are the new recruits due?" I asked him as I zipped my flight suit closed. He paused and scratched Toothless happily under the chin.

"Tomorrow, with the new General and Base Commander," he said thoughtfully, his tone turning a little pensive and I mentally kicked myself. For his girlfriend, I was being massively insensitive today, reminding him now about his shattered relationship with his father after the sheet incident.

"You know anything about him?" I asked as we checked out saddles.

"Her," I heard him say as he ducked under Toothless's left foreleg. "General Mala Zakhysnyk."

"Say what?" I asked, wondering how I would remember that. He popped his head up and his emerald eyes twinkled with humour.

"Zakhysnyk," he said easily. Sneaky twerp had obviously been practising! I scowled at him and he managed a slightly smug smirk. "She's Ukrainian but moved to Germany years ago. Apparently my Dad knew her—and they didn't get along…"

"There's a surprise," I muttered under my breath. He peered under the gearing of the tail assembly and tweaked something, ostensibly not hearing me.

"Apparently she's hard as nails, incredibly difficult to please and takes no crap whatsoever." There was a pause as we contemplated the effect this would have on Berk. I smothered a snigger. "In fact, Gobber says she's a complete ball-breaker!" It was my turn to smile.

"Hmm…not something I have to be worried about!" I commented smugly as he poked his head up again, looking alarmed. His green eyes widened at my smirk and he sighed.

"I see your point," he said warily and peered at the gearing once more. And then something caught my eye and I smirked: the small grey shape of Myrkr was approaching, her back arched, wings half-furled and tail flicking. She was clearly stalking him…and Toothless was watching indulgently, confident she wouldn't harm him. I rested a hand on Stormfly's nose to keep her quiet as we watched the little female Night Fury close on him…and then pounce! She landed hard and squashed him flat onto his face under Toothless, who unhelpfully pulled back, leaving his Rider helpless and being bounced on by the smaller dragon.

"Astrid!" he protested, suspecting I was tackling him…but as he rolled, he came face to face with an excited Night Fury, the tongue lapping his bruised face with sticky saliva. It was hardly the kiss he was hoping for and he protested and tried to push her off…but she just growled and bounced on him harder.

"Astrid!" he pleaded, cringing. He was bruised from the fight last night and though he had managed to perform exceptionally well since…he was still injured. I swooped forward and grabbed Myrkr, pulling her off him and tickling under her chin, temporarily rendering her a drooling mess. I dropped to my knees by him and offered him my hand.

"You okay, babe?" I asked him softly and he groaned…then grabbed my hand and pulled me down onto him. His arms wrapped around me as he stared up into my face, a goofy grin on his face.

"I am now," he murmured and stole a small kiss. I trailed my hand down his cheek and jaw and stared into his eyes: he really was totally enamoured and while I was loving the attention, I knew we had to get on with our jobs.

"Hiccup…" I murmured but he smiled gently.
"Do you trust me?" he asked me and I knew the answer. I had failed this test once: never again.

"Of course, lover-boy," I assured him and he visibly puffed up with confidence. He kissed me again.

"Then let's go flying," he said. "I know how far and fast Toothless can go and I am suspecting Stormfly can go as far and almost as fast as he can. So I want us to go and inspect that Nest again." My eyes widened and I sat back as he slowly sat up. His warm hand twisted with mine, fingers lacing between mine and eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"Um…Hiccup…isn't that about 1600 miles?" I asked, recalling when we had been tracking him during his…absence. "A round trip of over 3000 miles?" He raised a hand to my cheek and gently stroked my skin.

"She'll be fine," he assured me. "I'll be with you all the way. If she gets tired, we'll set down in Norway and rest up."

"Okay…" I knew I was still sounding guarded but he was almost bouncing with enthusiasm.

"Astrid—it has been a while since I was last there and we have no idea if anything has hatched or if they have removed any of the eggs…" he told me passionately. "There are already some more Night Terrors but I have no idea if any more dragons have hatched…and I hate the idea they would come under Drago's control…or Viggo's." His voice hardened slightly and there was an edge there.

"Are you okay?" I asked him, hearing his voice drop. His hands slid down to my upper arms and his thumbs gently stroked my suit.

"Astrid…it was the right decision," he said softly. "I was their ally, for Thor's sake…and they treated me like dirt…and he was cruel to the dragons as well…" His gaze trailed to Toothless, who was barking to Myrkr—and she was spiritedly barking back. "He kept Toothless in a cage all the time! And they just enjoyed seeing people hurt…” I leaned forward and gently kissed him on the cheek…and instantly regretted it. I had hit a patch of Night Fury saliva and it tasted utterly foul!

Frantically, I pulled away and his eyes flicked up, worried…and then he saw me desperately wiping my mouth on my sleeve and began to chuckle. I was spitting and wiping my tongue on my sleeve.

"Thanks for the sympathy," I grumbled, gagging. He just chuckled at my dismay.

"I'm sorry—I know it tastes yuk!" he apologised, trying to control himself, though he was still grinning. I punched his shoulder gently but he caught my hand and kissed it tenderly. "Let me…” He grabbed a bottle of water and handed it to me to swill my mouth out. I managed a small smile as I spat the water out…and then couldn't resist splashing at him. "Hey-no fair!" he protested, reaching for another bottle. "Just you wait…”

And I was up, racing away and hiding behind Stormfly as he tried to squirt water at me. He scrambled up, trying to get to me but I was as quick as him and a little more agile and managed to get a good shot at him. Hair soaking, he dived at me and grabbed me, soaking me as well. I pouted but he was dripping and grinning at me in unfamiliar triumph and he gently wiped my face with his sleeve, then kissed me.

"Let's go…before the others get suspicious," he suggested, still grinning. I sat up and wrung my braid out.

"Why aren't we taking them?" I asked him and he stumbled to his feet, giving me a pout.
"Don't you want to spend the day with me, Milady?" he asked plaintively, resting a hand on his heart in a wounded gesture. I smiled at his plea and reached for his hand, catching his warm grasp and smiling.

"Of course, my love," I reassured him. "But why not any of the others on this trip?" He sighed.

"Two simple reasons…well, three, in all honesty," he admitted. "Firstly, only the Monstrous Nightmares could keep us with us. Secondly, after last night, I do not want to spend an entire day with Snotlout and Gustav bugging me…and you. And thirdly…I wanted you to myself." I pressed against him, grinning.

"Sound reasoning," I complimented him. "Okay, Commander Dragon Boy…is it just a reconnoitre mission or something else?" He looked down into my eyes and smiled, pleased at my question.

"We may be able to bring some eggs back…for safety…" he murmured and I saw the audacious ambition in his eyes, the naked desire to get those eggs away from Drago and Viggo and Ryker and back under his and Toothless's care. I whistled Stormfly and she happily bounded over. I scrambled into the saddle.

"Last one to the coast is a chicken!" I shouted and flung her into the air. He stared after me, a small smile on his lips as he ran to the bins and gathered some cargo nets and supplies.

"In your dreams!" he muttered into his com and jumped onto his dragon to fly after me

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We headed north fast. Hiccup took the opportunity to inform Gobber that he was taking me on a long patrol north and that we would be on our trackers. He had reactivated all of Toothless's trackers and ensured ours were working once he had been freed after the trial and had ensured all the riders were now tagged. Of course, the twins had protested, Gustav had whined and Cami had gone into a huff.

"No Burglar should be trackable!" she grumbled.

"It may save your life," Hiccup had pointed out. She scowled at him.

"Yeah…or may endanger it if your enemy can track you!" she stropped.

Once we were over the North Sea, we really accelerated and I could feel the change in Stormfly, the suddenly honing of her shape to aerodynamic maximum, the measured flapping of wings…and the vibration of sheer joy in her chest. She was loving this…and Hiccup and Toothless matched speeds exactly with us. I hunkered down to keep out of the wind and fidgeted to get comfortable.

"So what should we talk about?" I asked Hiccup and there was a pause.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked me warily.

"My fabulous boyfriend," I said happily. I really wanted to know everything about him because there was still so much I didn't know-as I had found out when we talked as he was imprisoned.

"Fabulous, eh? When we find him-smarmy bastard-I'll kill him," he muttered playfully.

"Well, if we can't talk about him, tell me about you…Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third…" I teased him. There was a moment's silence and I saw his head swivel to look at me, the helmet enclosing his head with his auburn hair sticking out under the back and blowing in the wind.
"Why would you want to know about me?" he asked quietly.

"Because I love you, you idiot," I told him. "And I need to know what I can so I don't...hurt or upset you. So I can understand you..."

"I think my Dad would say i was beyond understanding..."

"And he's wrong, babe," I reminded him. "So...where to start..."

And he did. He explained about his life-not the superficial details he had given me but all of it-the death of his mother, the rejection after he was fit to leave the hospital after the accident, the occasional nannies, school, bullies, arriving at Berk...and everything since...I listened, occasionally prompting him, soothing him when he had to stop. He had the choice what to tell me and he was painfully honest...because he had decided to trust me. Because, I realised, he truly loved me. And that felt like a huge responsibility, because his only close family had catastrophically rejected him and I was now it.

And we were already diving past Svalbard, arrowing low over the frigid sea, heading east. He was more focussed as we closed, his voice gentle but enthusiastic about the nest and the baby dragons he had seen there. And there was a sadness as he spoke about the way Viggo and his men treated the young dragons and I felt his dismay for weaker creatures brutalised by the vicious Trappers. We dropped so we almost skimming the waves, spray splashing our helmets. I glanced at my com and the in-helmet head's-up overlay...and the outline of the islands of Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa. I leaned forward because there was a red shape outlined against the beach with a stream of very alarming data.

"Shit! Submarine!" I hissed over the com and Hiccup muttered and dragged Toothless north, Toothless's wingtip cutting through the waves. Stormfly followed as we swooped round the island and skinned low to land low on the slopes of the rocky spine of the land. He slid from the saddle and crouched low by Toothless and I followed suit, pressing hard against my dragon. He had already fished some binoculars from his pack and inspected the landing and I heard his breath hitch. Wordlessly, he handed me the binoculars and I peered at the submarine, seeing Viggo and Ryker discussing and then heading towards the mountain. I glanced at Hiccup, who was pale at the sight of the Grimborns.

"Astrid," he murmured. "Get back." I saw him swallow and his eyes darken in fear...but also determination.

"Hiccup...dammit...I'm not having you get yourself into trouble again..." I hissed, scooting over to his side, grabbing his hand. His hand tightened on mine but his eyes remained locked on the enemy.

"If they get close to the nest, I'll get them away," he said firmly.

"Hiccup..."

"Astrid...I am supposed to be your senior officer," he reminded me softly. "And I won't let them get their hands on you..."

"Well, I am sure as Hell not letting them get their hands on you either!" I shot back. "I only just got you to myself..." There was a pause and then he gave a small nod.

"Bud...let's go see those dragons..." he murmured, the grip tightening on mine as Toothless bounced up...then slank round the mountain towards a forbidding outcrop lower down the far side
of the mountain. I followed them with Stormfly at my back, trying to tread quietly, glad I always wore the Trank gun on my hip. The Night Fury took us down and Hiccup hunkered down, seeing a single guard at the mouth of the cave. The man tensed then turned away…and I put two Trank darts in his back. He flopped bonelessly as we scampered down and entered the cave.

And I stared in shock.

Above our head, small dragons were flapping wildly, big-eyed and cute, their dilated pupils showing no fear or hostility…because they were too young to have met the cruelty of man yet…though not for long. I thought I saw a small Zippleback, a Nightmare and a Nadder as well as some Terrible and Night Terrors and two small dragons I didn't recognise flapping hopelessly on the floor. Hiccup stared and then walked further into the cave…to see the drift of dragon eggs…a little smaller than it had been but still an amazing resource. He pulled his helmet off and stowed it on Toothless's saddle…and then walked forward, his green eyes wide in shock. I pulled off my helmet and narrowed my eyes, following him closer to the little ground-bound dragons.

"Hiccup-why aren't they flying?" I asked. He gazed at them, then slowly advanced, his face calm and gently cooing to them.

"Hey there, guys…nothing to be scared of," he murmured, extending a hand. Both small dragons growled and snapped at him, clearly anxious. One looked grey and…dry. He paused and crouched, his hands on his knees as he inspected them. "They're Tidal Class," he realised. "Sea dragons. They can't fly…they use the wings to 'fly' through the water." The stared at the long-necked dragon. "That's a Scauldron…and it's drying out…"

"We need to get it to the sea, right?" I guessed. Toothless growled. "Hiccup…how long does it take to walk from the beach?" He forced his memory back.

"An hour?" he murmured. "But maybe less without me. I wasn't trying, to be honest…" I frowned and heard a buzzing mechanical noise.

"And on quad bike?" I asked him urgently.

"Um..about ten minutes?" he guessed, looking at me.

"And when did we last see them?"

"Ten minutes ago," he whispered hoarsely as the engines came closer and we shared an alarmed look. "Oh Thor…hide!" I stared at him and we grabbed the guard, positioning him as if he fell asleep on the job…then ran to the back of the cave, the two dragons at our backs. Cautiously, we scrambled around the pile of eggs to try to hide at the back…and were shocked to see the baby dragons all follow Toothless and Stormfly, hiding silently. I frowned, then grabbed our water bottles, pouring them over the greying baby Scauldrons. Hiccup grabbed me under the arms and lifted me away, dumping me behind the adult dragons and pressing a hand over my mouth. His green eyes were anxious-but also determined.

"Stay quiet," he murmured as they arrived at the door. "I won't let anything happen to you, Milady." We ducked down quietly as the Grimborns arrived. Viggo swaggered in the door and lifted his weapon, staring into the darkness.

"I know you're there," he announced. "Come out!"

Chapter End Notes
A/N: (For those unfamiliar with the British slang term) A duck is slang for a score of zero in cricket. To break your duck therefore means…you've managed to score (!)-often after a series of innings when you haven't…
Fifty-Five: New Arrivals

Hiccup's eyes widened at the bold declaration and he looked scared, his face tightening. He dipped into a crouch and Toothless silently nudged him with his muzzle, the gentle nuzzle not calming him.

"I know you're there, Hiccup," Viggo announced.

_How?_ My eyes flicked to him and for the briefest second, I wondered if he had played us false… but I crushed the thought. Because it was so easy to suspect treachery and very difficult to prove loyalty…but he had. He had certainly proven his love to me. And he was trembling because Viggo had treated Hiccup about as well as everyone else had. His emerald gaze flicked to see me and he paused, raising a finger to his lips and gently shaking his head.

"Um, how would that be. Viggo?" he asked calmly, visibly forcing himself to relax.

"You really only think in a linear manner," Viggo mocked him. "You think I didn't expect treachery? You think I hadn't prepared for your escape…" There were noises from the doorway-boots and the snap of metallic firing bolts—and I snatched a quick look to see Ryder and almost a dozen men, armed with Kalashnikovs, lined up behind the younger Grimborn. My hand dropped to my Trank gun and knew it wasn't enough.

"Hmm," Hiccup murmured, quietly pulling the nets from his packs and opening them. "Not so sure about that. Your submarine didn't like what I did to it. We tracked you limping back to Veidimadurinnflo very…very…very…slowly… That must have been humiliating!" There was an awkward pause at his sarcastic taunt.

"It certainly impacted the bottom line," Viggo said tightly, his dark eyes glittering with anger. I saw Hiccup stiffen at the menace in his tone but he still cautiously lifted an egg off the pile and carefully slid it into the nets, then scanned his keen emerald gaze over the pile. There was another small black egg and a deep grey one and he carefully picked those out. "And I gather Drago was very displeased with your actions as well."

"What can I say?" Hiccup asked lightly. "Not really a people person. Especially when I'm being threatened."

"Shame," Viggo snapped, as Hiccup carefully loaded more eggs into the nets. I was already opening the other net and started gathering eggs…though Hiccup paused and quietly pointed out the ones he wanted. "You know, I expected more circumspection from you."

"Well, I wasn't sure you guys would come back…but there has been consistent cloud cover here for the last three days so it was a fair guess you'd make a run when you were sure there was no possibility of satellite surveillance."

"Aren't you ashamed, spying on the property of another sovereign nation?" Viggo taunted him.

"Not as much as you should be trespassing on said land and stealing valuable biological and historical artefacts from it," he replied calmly. "And honestly, this territory is covered by historic surveillance for the Arctic Fleet Naval bases from the Cold War…and about a hundred satellites launched by people interested in tracking Arctic ice recession and global warming." The first net
was almost full now and I was beginning to see his pattern. He was collecting a couple from each type...as well as any which looked like black Night Fury eggs. I recognised Nadder eggs-well, I had been doing the reading he had sent me on my dragon and noted he was picking from all levels of the eggs, uncertain if any of the levels had better chances of being viable and hatching. I grabbed a couple of extra Nadder eggs-just in case...

"You can't hide back there for ever, Hiccup," Viggo told him in an irritated voice.

"You can always come back and get me," Hiccup invited cheerily. "I'm very comfortable here, thanks!" He fished another unfamiliar purple and orange egg and slid it into the net.

"And aren't you curious how we tracked you?" Viggo asked. Hiccup paled but forced his voice to remain even. I saw him swallow as he stood upright and faced towards the man behind the pile of eggs.

"Not really," he said lightly. "Presumed you injected me with a tracker when we had so much fun together." His voice was light but he was rigid as a board, almost hyperventilating.

"Ah, fun times indeed," Viggo said, his smooth voice back in place. "You really are a pretty boy, aren't you..." I stared at him and felt a heavy weight hit the pit of my stomach.

"Doubt that," Hiccup said bitterly. "Skinny ginger fishbone? Hello? And to be frank, they really weren't fun..." His cheeks were flushed and I was starting to wonder what he had done...and what else he had conveniently 'forgotten'. But looking at him, I read shame and pain in his taut face and I recalled how terrified he had been when reminded of Dagur. Whatever Viggo had done to him wasn't of the order of Dagur's rape but there was no doubt the man had abused him physically, at least. And he knew we were facing too many enemies with too few dragons and too much cargo to make a successful frontal assault to escape.

"But once Ryker had finished with you, you didn't even recall the implantation of the tracker...as we planned," Viggo announced triumphantly and I saw his head bow, the auburn bangs shadowing his features. I finished stuffing the second net and fastened it to Stormfly. I blinked: most of the baby dragons had settled on her as a perch though a couple had chosen Toothless, who was pulling the draconic equivalent of an exasperated face.

"Gotta hand it to you," Hiccup said calmly, "you know how to treat your employees..." He turned to me and there was a bleak apology in his eyes. He helped me fasten the net to Toothless and gestured to the tunnel vanishing back from the cave. "Take Toothless," he murmured. I grasped his hand and saw his face filled with horrible shame.

"No-I'm not leaving you!" I hissed.

"Now stop wasting my time, Hiccup," Viggo snapped, the patience leeching from his voice. "The longer you make me wait, the more you're gonna suffer for it." I saw Hiccup's throat bob and anxiety flared in his eyes.

"I have to keep him busy while you go," he said hoarsely.

"No," I moaned, staring at him in shock. He had just given up, his propensity for self-sacrifice driving him to hand himself over if it would get his best friend and me away. He grasped my face in his hands and kissed me hard on the lips, his desperation overwhelming.

"I love you," he murmured. "And I trust you. He wants Toothless..."

"They want you!" I reminded him urgently. "Why?" He stared towards the impatient Viggo,
murmur of the men and the shuffle of the feet growing closer. And he closed his eyes.

"Because they know they can torture me at a whim," he said quietly. "And handing me over to Drago will appease him for their failure to hand over the dragons I freed." I was already shaking my head in horror but he managed a small, brave smile. "Astrid, I love you and I can't let him get you. I-I know what Ryker wanted to do to you and I will die before I let him hurt you. And don't worry...they won't hurt me first up...they'll have their fun." My eyes widened in concern. "Viggo likes to manipulate, to confuse and outwit his opponent. Last time and I suspect, this time, he'll get me to play the ancient Viking game, Maces and Talons against him. He is a master and if I lose...I pay a forfeit." His throat tightened.

"What did they make you do, Hiccup?" I asked urgently. He shook his head and gently raised his hand to stroke my cheek delicately.

"Stop them getting the dragons," he whispered, then pushed me away, gesturing to Toothless to retreat after a gentle hug and a few softly murmured words of reassurance. The dragon looked depressed but wearily trudged into the tunnel with his precious cargo. Stormfly followed and I turned to watch him pull his shoulders back and scramble over the rocks at the edge of the huge drift of eggs before clambering down to face them.

"Well, you got me," he said cheerfully. "What d'you wanna do?"

Viggo glared as Ryker roughly grabbed his arm and motioned his men to go and look for the dragon...but when they finally managed to scrabble behind the nest of eggs, all they found were a few eggs rolled down and a small crack in the wall. And no sign of the Night Fury. Ryder turned to the rider with a clenched fist.

"Where is the dragon?" he growled. Hiccup jerked his head up to face the man and a small smile played on his lips.

"Chilling, I guess," he said lightly. "I'm not the boss of him!"

I heard the blow he earned over the com, the pained grunt the impact forced from him as I listened from back in the tiny tunnel. Stormfly was hunkered down behind me and I was sitting, curled up within the cocoon of Toothless's huge wings, his jet colouration making us invisible a few yards back in the tunnel. The baby dragons were still and fearful, their jewelled eyes closed as we waited. And I bit my lips against the interrogation I heard through his com channel: he had deliberately left it open so I could listen. So maybe he knew I was with him, even when he was horribly alone. And my eyes burned with tears as I heard the interrogation continue, the cruel threats, the vicious blows and the faint grunts of pain or whimpers they got from him as they tried to break him. This morning, I had woken in his arms: now he was in their grasp and I had no clue what to do.

And I couldn't help myself thinking: we should've brought Snotlout.

oOo

The channel had gone silent as they took him away, the faint sounds of breathing and the crunch of steps on the gravel...until they reached the quad bikes. Then I heard Viggo speak.

"He can ride with you, Ryker," he said smoothly. "I know you enjoy spending time with him."

"That makes one of us," Hiccup muttered.

"Just don't damage him...too much..." Viggo said smoothly and I felt my skin crawl. "He's still got significant value as a bargaining chip...and Drago will definitely want to spend some time
discussing his previous conduct…"

"Can't wait…"

There was a thud and a groan as Ryker hit him for his smart comment and I cringed against Toothless. I felt the vague rumble in his chest as he grumbled at the whole situation. His hearing was a thousand times more acute than mine—he had probably heard the actual blow rather than the relayed sound through the com. As the buzz and growl of the quad bikes pulled away, I slow rose to my feet and grabbed my helmet, activating the infrared overlay and peering through the entrance of the tunnel—to see two men still guarding the entrance, the cold of their weapons looking black against the riotous false colours of the warm bodies of the men. The rest of the cave was cool and blue-grey, the eggs barely warmer than the rest—except a trio that rapidly flared from green through orange, yellow and white…

I ducked at the explosion sounded and the men ducked down, heads swinging in terror at the sudden noise. One was hit hard in the head by a jet-propelled baby dragon and he fell like an unstrung puppet. And then I edged forward… to see two small dragons that reached about halfway to my knee look up hopefully with brilliant red eyes. To my eye, they looked like greyish versions of those weird running bird-like dinosaurs from Jurassic Park—the ones that smarmy kid remembers the name of and end up munched by the T-rex. I frowned and flipped my helmet up then hunkered down and offered them my hands, finding their heads gently and whispering reassurances to them before they ever got the idea I wasn't a friend. They cooed gently and rubbed against me, chirping. I scratched under their chins again and walked forward, finding the other dragon that had knocked out the Dragon Hunter.

It was lying on its back, whimpering, a wing twisted under its small body. It was a yellowish creature with a weird tail that looked like it was made of three twisted parts. But it was scared and in pain, so I picked it up and stroked it then, as it wouldn't stop whimpering. Finally I sighed and unzipped the front of my flight suit, stuffing the miserable little creature against my chest. It fidgeted but quietened. I had no idea why I did it but it reminded me of a frightened baby in need of comfort. Sighing, I turned back to the tunnel and looked to my little dinosaur-dragons: they inclined their heads and raced alongside me, their little eyes locked on my face like very obedient dogs. Toothless inspected them and gave a small grumble.

"Yeah…I know Hiccup would love this," I murmured. "But we gotta get him back. And we don't have a lot of weaponry." He gave me an offended look. "Well-except you and you are way too important to risk," I added. "Hiccup gave himself up to keep you free. They locked you up all the time, didn't they? That really upset him…" I frowned and turned back to the eggs, searching through and seeing what I was hoping for—a couple that were slightly warmer. I grabbed them and shoved them in the saddle-bags, where they jostled for places with some of the baby dragons, who had decided they were comfortable places to curl up.

Toothless gave me a perplexed look.

"Just in case," I murmured and he inclined his head at the bulging nets of eggs. I double-checked: they were all stone cold. "Toothless-Hiccup says you can find your way in the dark… your…'special roar'? Can you find us a way out the back?"

The Night Fury gave me a sad look, then opened his mouth and exhaled a small puff of purple plasma, though the explosive sound was far higher and almost bounced from the walls. I found I could almost 'see' the outline of the jagged passage fro the echoes as I gently climbed into Toothless’s saddle. My little dinosaur-dragons leapt up in front of me, chirping excitedly as the
Night Fury began to bounce along, heading through the outcrop. I could hear Stormfly trundling along and I whispered apologies to my dragon but I heard her chirp forgivingly as we burrowed deeper into the mountain. We couldn't go out the front and I really hoped Toothless could get us out unseen…so we could find some way to get Hiccup free.

The Grimborns were showing no signs of haste as they set up camp by the moored submarine, the extended gangplank allowing the men to shuttle in and out of the vessel. An awning was erected and a couple of campfires lit while the men set up a camp table, two folding chairs…and a game board.

Hiccup was shoved roughly into one chair, his wrists roped in front go him and flight suit stripped down to his waist. His short-sleeved T-shirt offered little protection against the arctic wind so his arms were covered with goose-bumps and he was shivering slightly. His wide green gaze was wary as he watched the brothers exchange a few words, recognising the dynamic he had worked out during his previous captivity. Viggo—slightly smaller, younger and far smarter—was the leader while Ryker—the larger, more brutal and certainly less controlled—was definitely the henchman. Ryder nodded and Viggo walked calmly to sit in front of the prisoner, his dark eyes carefully inspecting the Maces and Talon board as he expertly set it up.

"Are you ready?" he asked Hiccup and the rider sighed.

"No. Can I go now?" he asked in an exasperated voice. Viggo's eyes narrowed.

"Now, Hiccup—you really are being stubborn," he sighed.

"Not really news either," the rider told him shortly. "Just save yourself some effort and let me go."

"And what?" Viggo asked. "I know the Russian Navy have been alerted to unusual activity in this area…"

"And whose fault is that?" Hiccup shot back reasonably.

"And my point is that you really don't fancy becoming their prisoner," the younger Grimborn warned him sharply. "They are a lot less gentle and far more direct than I am in asking their questions…"

"Really? Wow. But I was thinking I've had so much experience being a prisoner of all sorts of lunatics who think they can steal and use dragons that maybe I should publish a book. A blog at the very least. Perhaps an online guide? And I have to say that so far, you're barely scoring even two handcuffs…"

Hands tightened brutally around his upper arms as Ryker grabbed him, leaning over the prisoner and breathing quietly in his ear. "Keep talking, fishbone. I want your girlfriend. Where is she? I doubt you'd come all this way without her."

"Actually, I would," Hiccup retorted. "Not exactly the most trusted rider now…but no one can match Toothless for speed and range…"

"And that's the other question we want answered…" Viggo commented, moving his Chieftain on the board. "The dragon." Wincing at the pressure of iron-hard fingers digging brutally into his biceps, Hiccup shook his head.

"I thought we spent a while making it clear I am not answering!" he said bitingly. And then he
flinched for Ryker was only an inch from his ear.

"Oh, I'm willing to have another go," he growled, one hand sliding up to wrap around Hiccup's smooth neck, tightening just enough to have him stiffening with fear. Rough fingers dug into the younger man's cheek and twisted the head round to Ryker could stare into his eyes. "And I am going to make you scream, boy."

"Why is it no one ever considers wanting to make me sing? Or dance? Or recite poetry? What is it about screaming?"

"Because I want to see you in pain," Ryker hissed, his fingers digging into Hiccup's neck painfully. 

"Um…maybe you could try singing? From what I hear the men say, that should do the trick…"

The fact that Ryker broke first and spun the younger man round, punching him hard across the face then following up with a vicious kick to the chest and another to the gut didn't feel much like a triumph to Hiccup as he curled up, eyes screwed tight and teeth gritted against a groan. He had thumbed his com on to their private channel as he was taken, knowing Astrid would hear him, needing to feel that she was with him because Ryker terrified him. He hadn't told her what Ryker did, how the man had beaten him, pawed him, forced him to…be his brother…

He was shaking as Ryker dragged him up and slammed him onto the chair once more, meeting Viggo's angry scowl. "You disappoint me," the younger Grimborn said.

"Can always be relied on for that," Hiccup replied thickly, his slightly bleary green gaze sliding over the board. "Practically my middle name…" He moved a piece. Viggo's scowl deepened and he moved another as Hiccup leaned back and sighed. "You know, overall you're pretty disappointing as well?"

Cold eyes flicked up to inspect his battered face and the Dragon Trapper gave a slow smile. "On what basis do you make that assumption?" Viggo challenged him. Hiccup gave a small smile. "Just another thing you don't know," he said evenly, taunting the man. Viggo-master strategist, game player and a man who prided himself on knowing everything five steps ahead-lurched to his feet.

"You make it very hard to treat you humanely when I should just hand you over to my brother," he threatened angrily. "In what way do you think I am disappointing?" Hiccup leaned forward and moved his Chief, removing a piece from the board. He lifted it up and then threw it to the ground. "Your assassin," he said slightly smugly. "Bye, bye, Ryker…"

Viggo snapped round, his fists clenched. Losing his temper handed victory to Hiccup, vindicated his tactics and Viggo hated handing an advantage to anyone. They had tried making him a brother, a proper Grimborn, savouring the decadence and sybaritic delights that life had to offer-and the boy had been shy, reticent and stubborn…now he was being just as stubborn but smart-mouthed and immensely irritating. His eyes alighted on some shapes by the gangplank.

"Get those eggs into the hold-NOW!" he shouted and a man scrambled to comply as the younger Grimborn spun back. "Alright-you've got what you wanted. Ryker…over to you. I've tried being humane, tried to persuade you that co-operation with us as our brother, our wrangler, our Dragon Whisperer would be infinitely preferable…but your defiance means…now it's time to be…direct."

"Let's…let's not be hasty!" Hiccup protested as Ryker grabbed him by the arm and hauled him back from the table, back from the pool of light into the frigid darkness a little further along the
beach. Hiccup was stumbling, struggling and breathing hard as he was thrown roughly to the ground, his hands still tied. He stared up as Ryker pulled out a very large and unpleasant looking skinning knife. The older Grimborn dropped to his knees by Hiccup, one hand slamming flat in Hiccup's chest and pressed him back into the gravelly beach as the knife dug into his middle, snagged the edge of the cloth and sliced his T-shirt open.

"Now, boy…" Ryker laughed, the point tracing over the heaving chest and stomach beneath him, "I am going to enjoy seeing how much we need to do to get you to finally talk. It was a stupid move to anger my brother because really, I wanted to do this the first day we had you in our hands. He was the only reason why we haven't done this before. And you broke when I hit you…what will you do when I cut you?"

"Um…bleed? A bit? Prefer not to…” Hiccup mumbled, his mouth suddenly dry. Ryker's expression was horribly like Dagur's in that moment and he knew of the man's proclivity for sexual violence. He had threatened Astrid with full intent to carry through and Hiccup had needed to think very fast to get her away. But both men had their eye on him as well…and here he was, flat in his back, half-naked on a freezing beach north of the arctic circle with a man looming over him who really meant him harm. The light of the gibbous moon and the faintest green haze of the Aurora was enough to show him what was about to happen and gleam off the knife. He grimaced as it cut into his chest, dark blood staining the tip.

Something moved: something fast. He blinked and saw another blur. Ryker, oblivious, twisted the tip of the blade and he gave a small cry of pain. Ryder's big face folded in a nasty smile.

"I can see this is going to be productive…” he said. And there was another blur beside him…and the man suddenly jerked. The knife fell from a nerveless hand and he stared at the limp arm.

"What?"

Hiccup suddenly burst into action, struggling and rolling away, oblivious of his wounds and the cold as he threw himself backwards, trying to dig his boot into the gravel and lever himself to his feet. Ryder bellowed and lunged at him…but his right arm and leg seemed not to be working and the man was having problems moving. He overbalanced and toppled onto his side on the beach, mumbling as half his face seemed not to be moving either. Hiccup turned and ran along the beach before he could call for help, not caring where he was heading and just praying his dragon was nearby. He lifted his com to his mouth.

"I hope…you're still listening…Milady," he panted as he staggered and his prosthetic skidded in the shingle. "Could use a little help…about now…”

And then he skidded to a stop as two small dragons appeared out of the gloom, their grey-green colour highlighting dark red eyes and tails lifted, stingers poised to attack. Hiccup breathed hard, lifted his hands and stared at them: they were a species he was unfamiliar with.

"Um…I'm a friend…” he tried and they hissed, lifting their tails and advancing at him. "Oh Thor…” he murmured.

"Zippy! George! Back off-he's a friend!"

He had never felt so relieved. "Astrid!" he breathed.

oOo

I sprinted down the shallow slope, calling the little dinosaur-dragons to stop them attacking Hiccup. He froze, breathing hard as his head swung round, his emerald eyes full of utter relief.
"Astrid!"

I had never been so pleased to hear him and I raced forward, hitting him with a fierce embrace. "Babe," I murmured and kissed him urgently, feeling his warm body pressed against mine. He kissed me back but I could taste blood and I was reminded how difficult his last hour or two had been. I pulled back and he lifted his still-bound wrists, his battered face tilted by a small smile.

"I have never been so relieved to see you, Milady…not that I'm not always happy and relieved to see you," he added quickly. His hand gently stroked my cheek and I smiled, then concentrated on freeing his hands. I quickly kissed his cheek again once he was free and ran my fingers through his dishevelled hair…and then turned to the little dragons, who were chirping and chittering between themselves.

"Zippy, George-this is Hiccup. He's a friend…” I told them firmly and offered them my hand. With a pause, they sniffed, smelling his scent mixed with mine: without hesitation, I grabbed his hand and offered it to them. They sniffed, chirped then nodded, looking eagerly at me.

"Do I need to ask?" he murmured in an amused voice, dragging his flight suit up and zipping it closed against the freezing air. "Zippy? George?"

"Um…I think we should get outta here," I offered with a smile and whistled. The shapes of our dragons bounded down the slope and Hiccup gave a delighted laugh as Toothless tackled him to the ground, giving him a thorough licking."Hiccup…Ryker will have alerted them…and there's going to be some serious fireworks soon…” His expression changed and he looked at me, confused.

"Meaning?" he asked, pushing Toothless back and getting into the saddle. "And why are my saddle-bags full of small dragons?" I got aboard Stormfly, checked my saddle-bags and their passengers were secure and whistled. The dino-dragons, Zippy and George, raced up and latched their claws onto the saddle, cuddled tight against me as we took off. I could hear Hiccup follow as I pulled my helmet down and heard him switch to helmet microphone on the com.

"The baby dragons are all here…but I may have ensured that Viggo and Ryker took some warmer than usual eggs," I confessed as we circled round and gained height, the nets of eggs bulging beneath us.

"Warmer…?" he murmured and caught on… and then I heard a low chuckle through the com. "Oh Milady, you have an evil mind…”

"…that is entirely at your disposal, Commander Dragon Boy," I replied cheerily as an explosion shook the submarine and something exploded though the lateral hull, well below the waterline. Toothless dived down and grabbed the missile-a baby Gronckle-as a second explosion propelled another dragon right through the stern hull, rendering the vessel entirely unusable. Stormfly zipped down and we grabbed the small white creature that was tumbling through the air, tiny ragged wings utterly useless for flight. I stared at it…and met a pair of remote, pale blue eyes in a flat draconic face. I managed to give it a friendly rub and perched it under my body by Zippy and George as we swooped round once more, watching the submarine sink. Men were shouting, Viggo was screaming and bullets were chattering wildly into the air, completely in the wrong direction.

"Bet Viggo didn't see that coming," Hiccup murmured as we headed south.

oOo

We spent the night north of Trondheim, parked in a cave in an isolated Fjord that was locked still
in snow and freezing winds. Hiccup was exhausted, despite his protestations and the dragons had needed to rest as well. I had fed them all the fish we brought earlier when we emerged from the tunnels because I reckoned we needed the saddle-bag space for dragons. The Scauldrons had been doused in seawater on the way in so were happy and Hiccup had curled against Toothless, opening his arms and giving a sigh of relief as I snuggled into him. He had refused any offer to tend his wounds but I knew I would get him once we got back to BERK.

"You idiot," I murmured as Stormfly took up station on the other side of us, ensuring we were effectively shielded from every possible cold draft by two warm bodies. "Why did you just hand yourself over?"

"Didn't want my girlfriend and my best bud in their hands," he muttered, nuzzling his cheek into my hair. "I knew they wouldn't kill me…but they knew I was there. They didn't know about you."

"What was Ryker going to do?" I asked him softly and he stiffened.

"I honestly don't know," he admitted. "But I suspect it wouldn't have been pleasant. Um. At all…"

"Idiot," I murmured. "I just get my perfect boyfriend and he tries to get himself killed. Is that a message?"

"Implying nothing!" Hiccup murmured sleepily. "Perfect boyfriend? Are you seeing someone behind my back? Please not Snotlout…"

"Could've done with him when they showed up," I reminded him. He hummed for a moment.

"Yeah," he admitted. "I think I made a mistake there…"

"Next time we want alone time, take me to see the dolphins again," I advised him.

"I'll bear that in mind," he slurred as he dropped asleep.

We woke nicely warm in the predawn and stretched then got into the saddle. I had a packet of mints in my pocket and some water…but that was it, a pretty thin breakfast. Without delaying—because we were both really hungry—we flew out to sea and headed back south, flying parallel to the Norwegian coast and heading directly back for BERK with our precious cargo. We had to travel more slowly with the drag of the nets and the chittering and fidgety baby dragons but eventually, we reached com range and Hiccup dithered for a few minutes before making the call.

"Haddock to BERK," he commed. There was a pause and suddenly Gobber shouted over the channel:

"Where the Hel ha'ye bin, laddie?" I cringed and he shrugged.

"Um…air, cave, beach, air, cave, air again," he reported truthfully but very unhelpfully.

"I could put yer in jail fer that!" Gobber threatened.

"For the love of…" Hiccup replied, exasperated. "We're passing the Shetlands now and will be back in an hour…"

"I'd make in sooner, lad," Gobber advised him. "And come in the main garage…"

"Gobber-what?" Hiccup asked, his head swivelling to look at me, his green gaze concerned.

"Jest fer once, laddie, don't argue and follow a damned direct order!" And Gobber ended the link.
"Wow, it's just like Dad is back again. Oh joy…" Hiccup commented dryly.

"Well, we need to do something about the Scauldrons-they're going grey again…" I pointed out.

"I think we can assume they spend all their time in the water," Hiccup murmured and then he smiled. "And your little white friend is a Tidal Class as well…look at the wings…"

"So…they need a saltwater environment?" I asked.

"Maybe…a saltwater Loch?" he suggested and I smiled as we changed course: we had both thought of the perfect place. I kept stroking the little white dragon, wondering if I would ever see him again. He was purring happily as he nuzzled against my stomach.

"Be good, Snowy," I murmured. "And don't go too far, right?"

It was definitely time for breakfast as we circled round to the main garage and I lifted my com. "Haddock and Hofferson at the front gate," I murmured as the huge doors cracked open. Decelerating, we dipped in through the gap and we backwinged hard and waited for them to clang closed before we set down with our precious cargoes.

There was a welcoming committee. Gobber, the Riders and the department heads were all lined up by an unfamiliar jeep and troop transport truck. Hiccup clambered from the saddle and petted Toothless and then offered me a hand, which I accepted. I was stiff and very sore, having never flown for so long or so far and even Hiccup, who clearly had, was limping. We turned to face the newcomers…and saw eighteen new soldiers, all in neat green full uniform and three officers. Our new recruits had finally arrived. Hiccup's hand found mine as we inspected the officers in more detail.

One was an older man with thinning hair and a straggly beard, a sharp nose and mean eyes. The second was a taller, more built man with buzz-cut red hair and cold eyes. He looked a real hard case and very unfriendly. Both men wore Colonel's rank flashes. But in the middle was a tall woman with cold green eyes, an ageless face and page-boy cut strawberry blonde hair: she was clothed in the uniform of a General.

Gobber turned to us as I snapped to attention and ripped off a salute while Hiccup stared at me curiously: he tended to forget I was full time career military. The one-legged one-armed Colonel sighed. "Commander Haddock, Lieutenant Hofferson-good o'ye ter join us!" he said sarcastically and I groaned inwardly. That didn't sound a good start. "Yer just in time-five minutes ago-fer the arrival o' our new recruits, the new Security Chief, Colonel Eustace Mildew, the new XO Colonel Igor Throk…and the new Base Commander, General Mala Zashchishchat!"
Fifty-Six: New Problems.

"It's Zakhysnyk," the General snapped and Gobber coloured, even his ears turning scarlet in embarrassment. There was muttering among the riders and I silenced them with a very brief glare. Even Tuffnut and Gustav stilled and stood eyes-front, not a snigger among them. I noted Colonel Throk's face colour with anger and saw him cast a disdainful look at Gobber. I immediately felt a surge of anger: I was really fond of Gobber, even if he was massively indiscreet and grumpy 99% of the time and I hated the idea the new officers were already categorising him as a bumbling fool. I mean, at times he could be, but he was loyal and supportive and basically, he was our fool. And he had really had our back and stood up when he needed to.

The General inspected us coolly and nodded to me, giving a small salute.

"At ease, Lieutenant," she said calmly, her voice almost accentless and I hastened to comply. She turned to us and her gaze swept over Hiccup, who was standing thoughtfully, his emerald eyes bright with curiosity. He didn't look like a soldier, in his form-fitting jet flight suit with his dishevelled auburn hair, lean and lanky shape and completely non-military bearing. He was standing casually, shifting weight more onto his right leg, his prosthesis clicking slightly. "And you must be Hiccup Haddock." Her gaze was very calculating.

"Guilty as charged," he said calmly, a small smile lifting his lips. "Welcome to BERK, Ma'am." She stared at him coldly and nodded.

"And what is this?" she asked, gesturing to the dragons, the nets of eggs and the small dragons emerging from the saddle-bags. Zippy and George were already hovering around my legs, chirping interestedly and I knew my face betrayed my embarrassment that they were doing this while the new CO was interrogating us. I saw her face tighten at my expression and guessed I had annoyed her.

"This?" Hiccup asked, half-turning to look at the dragons-big and small-and the nets. "Oh, this would be what BERK is about. Those are dragons, General. The big ones are adults-Toothless the Night Fury, the black one and the blue and gold Deadly Nadder is Lieutenant Hofferson's Stormfly. The little ones are babies. We went to investigate the nest on Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa that Drago Bludvist and the Grimborns had located and encountered the Grimborns again. I-I may have needed to hand myself over to enable the Lieutenant to escape with the hatched dragons, a selection of eggs and our dragons."

General Zakhysnyk winced at his horrible pronunciation of Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa and her brows dipped. "And who authorised this mission?" she asked clearly. Hiccup shrugged.

"Me, I guess," he admitted. "I called Gobber to let him know but as leader of the Riders, I felt we needed to see what they were up to-especially since the recent unbroken cloud cover had obscured all satellite surveillance of the area."

"And you just went into an unknown situation with no back-up?" she clarified.

"Only Toothless and Stormfly had the speed and range to do the trip in a day," he explained.
calmly, though I could tell that the General was looking unconvinced.

"Yet it wasn't," she said coldly. "You were away overnight." He nodded.

"Um…that's true…but to be fair, I did miscalculate how much slower we would have to travel when we were heavily laden with the eggs," he admitted. She strode forward, her poise perfect.

"So…you went out on a poorly-planned and unauthorised mission with no back-up, you ended captured and injured and you arrive back late," she said coldly.

"Thank you for summing that up," he said sarcastically. "Um…we did rescue these eggs, the hatchlings and um…we did sink the Grimborns' sub."

"How?" the General asked. Hiccup glanced over to me and smiled.

"Lieutenant Hofferson's brilliance," he admitted. "She used hatching dragon eggs to cause the damage!" General Zakhysnyk turned to me.

"Dragon eggs explode as they hatch, General," I explained. "I ensured that the Grimborns took two eggs on the verge of hatching into their moored submarine as Commander Haddock was being interrogated by Viggo Grimborn."

"Interrogated? I was under the impression I was being astonishingly sarcastic," Hiccup added with a smile. I was willing him to shut up, realising this woman really didn't appreciate his brand of banter—even though a good part of me was relieved that he was feeling confident and relaxed enough to speak up.

"Commander Haddock?" the General asked pointedly. Hiccup shrugged.

"Um…it was decided I needed a military rank in order to make the team accept me and my authority," he explained.

"But you're not military," General Zakhysnyk clarified.

"Nope. 100% civilian," he smiled cheerfully. "My father was the military man—which is the reason why I would never make a soldier. Or want to." The General's eyes narrowed.

"You are Stoick the Vast's son?" she asked incredulously, her cool mask slipping for a moment. "Guilty as charged!" he shrugged. "Can't you see the family resemblance?" Her brows dipped.

"Hmm, I can see why he always expressed his disappointment," she condemned him coldly and I watched him stiffen just a little at the blow.

"Yeah, well he always had some pretty unrealistic expectations," he grumbled. At this point, Toothless decided he was bored and gave a little grumble, ambling forward towards his rider. The General's eyes widened and I saw her back up a small step. Her Colonels reached for their weapons but Hiccup turned to them in a shot. "Hands away from the weapons!" he barked. "Dragons are peaceful and docile provided they do not sense a threat! That means you as well, Colonel Mildew!"

He glared at the older man and Mildew growled but obviously lifted his hand away from the butt of his pistol. Holding his glare for a second more, the young rider turned to his dragon and gently laid a hand on his scaly face. "It's okay, Toothless!" he murmured.

The dragon gave a thoughtful croon and nudged the young rider. Hiccup winced.
"Ow! Yeah, just a little bruised, bud. I know this is really dull but this is our new boss, Dad's replacement..." Toothless warbled. "No, I know she hasn't said hello to you yet but I think she thinks she's in charge of people more than dragons," Growl. "No, she will be in charge of you as well. And yes, we will get your fish soon enough." Toothless gave a small whine. "I know you're hungry, bud. But I'm sure this won't take long..." He looked up and felt every eye on him. He offered a weak smile. "Um...that last one was just for his benefit, by the way...take as long as you want." The General gave him a very cold look. "Look-could we get these dragons back to their pens and the eggs safely into the Hatching Pit?"

"That would be the most appropriate," the General said firmly. "Please get them settled, change into more appropriate uniform and then meet in my office in...forty minutes." Hiccup nodded but I remained still until she looked at me. "Dismissed," she added and I gave a small salute and hastened to grab my girl, whistled to Zippy and George and helped Hiccup round up the hatchlings. Under the silent, intense scrutiny, we led our dragons and their cargo out of the garage and into the base. It was only when the door closed behind us that I relaxed and Hiccup gave a sigh.

"Um, not sure I made the best impression," he sighed.

"You think?" I asked, seeing his shoulders slump in resignation. He had been happy without his father, without that disapproving presence gnawing at his confidence, his sense of self-worth being slowly but surely eroded by a man who would never give his son a chance. Gobber had run the base with a light touch and had involved us both in keeping things on an even keel so the whole base had felt more like a family or a community...and Hiccup could sense that things were about to change, probably for the worse for him.

"Um, sorry," he said quietly. "I was nervous...and I tend to talk too much..."

"Really?" I was watching his head drop as well.

"Gods only know what she'll do," he sighed. "I mean, I'm not a soldier, I'm clearly a screw-up and I'm Stoick Haddock's son. If I'm not in front of a firing squad by the end of the day, I'll probably have done well..."

"Not on the first day, babe," I reassured him softly. "She'll wait at least until tomorrow..." We rounded the corner and saw the Pens ahead. Zippy and George raced forward then sped back to me, chirping and I paused to stroke and reassure them. They chittered happily and raced in circles around us as we chose Pen Three and got our dragons and the babies in. I commed the Vets to come and look at the little injured dragon's wing. As soon as I fished him out, Hiccup had been intensely interested and cooed and stroked the little dragon, befriending it with an ease and expertise that made my heart soar. He really was incredibly talented with them...and the anxiety was washed from his features as soon as he started talking to the little creature.

"It's a Triple Stryke," he explained, scratching the dragon's skull and hearing it purr in relaxation. "See the tail? It can split in combat and triples its aggressive potential...but you wouldn't do that to me, would you...?" The dragon drooled in delight and leaned into his gentle touch.

"That's a big fat no then," I grinned as he scratched under the chin as well. He sighed.

"We'd better get him to the Vets and then get ready to see the Boss," he suggested as he turned to Toothless's saddle.

Back in our room, we hastened to get changed. I shooed him into the shower, arguing that he had experienced a much tougher time than me and he really needed to clean up. Surprisingly, he didn't argue, vanishing into the little room with a pronounced limp and starting the shower swiftly. I
sighed, changed and braided and pinned my hair in a regulation bun. I changed and was almost ready when he emerged, damp and pensive and I paused to turn to him, my hand rising to his bruised face.

"You okay?" I asked softly and he leaned forward, a hand drifting to my shoulder as he pressed a very soft kiss on my lips.

"Better with you," he said quietly. His intense emerald gaze was locked on mine and he looked wary. "But I have no idea what she will do with me. But I can guarantee I won't be Commander Dragon Boy any more."

"Wanna bet?" I asked him gently. He nodded and gave me another tiny kiss.

"I'd bet my good leg," he sighed. I swatted his shoulder gently to try to cheer him up but he raised his eyebrows and ran his fingers through his damp auburn hair. "It's okay, Astrid. I'm not bothered."

But curiously, I was. He had done so much for BERK when it had really done some horrible things to him…and it had only been the last month or so that he had been treated as he should have been. He had dressed in what I considered his 'Base Commander' uniform: skinny black jeans, deep red shirt, black waistcoat and black boot, and we made our way to his father's…to the General's Office. Exactly forty minutes after we left the garage, he knocked and we were invited in.

It was weird to see General Zakhysnyk seated at the glass and steel desk, her cool green gaze sweeping over us. The tall, strongly-built shape of Colonel Throk stood at her shoulder, his grim face and cold eyes not filling either of us with confidence. I stood to attention until invited to stand at ease. Hiccup just stood casually and stared unabashedly at the General. She stared at him for a long time.

"There will be changes around here, Hiccup Haddock," she said at length. He sighed.

"I guessed," he said calmly.

"I cannot have a civilian in charge of priceless military ordnance," she reminded him. "And you have no right to claim any military rank!"

"That's true," he admitted. "But it was felt that I needed a military rank because the other riders wouldn't respect me without. I mean…why would they?"

"Why should they?" Throk asked directly. Hiccup stared at him thoughtfully.

"Because I am the Team leader," he said as if it was obvious. "I ride the Alpha dragon that the others follow. I have a proven record in missions. And no matter what bastards the other riders are at other times, they do as they are ordered on missions."

"And you?" Throk's uncompromising gaze turned to me. I felt myself blush.

"Sir?" I asked.

"Why should they respect you?" he repeated scornfully.

"They should respect my rank-sir-because I am the only commissioned officer in the unit," I began. "I kicked the group into shape, instilled some discipline, made sure there was finally some semblance of proper paperwork-reports, personnel evaluations and so forth."
"Hmm," was his verdict. I felt my temper begin to rise because these people had absolutely no clue how dysfunctional this team had been before I arrived, how badly they had treated Hiccup and how completely unmilitary they had been. And now...they all acted like proper soldiers and at least in some large part, that was down to me! I flicked my gaze forward and tried to master my breathing.

"I understand you are also the acting head of the Information and Intelligence department," General Zakhysnyk said coolly. Hiccup stared at her.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah-I've run IT since Ozzie died..." He stopped and swallowed. "Since Captain Oswaldson was murdered," he amended.

"And you arrived here at seventeen and did...hmm a primary degree and doctorate while there in under three years while working?" Hiccup nodded. "And you built most of the security protocols, revamped the firewall and undid the damage done by the previous Head of Security in less than an afternoon?"

"Um...yeah," he admitted.

"It would seem that is where your talents lie," the General decided. "So you can remain in charge of the It department-under Colonel Throk, of course."

"Naturally," Hiccup said dryly. "Looks like we're gonna be buddies, Colonel." Throk gave him an absolutely scornful look and Hiccup forced himself to smile pleasantly.

"But you will not remain in charge of the Riders," the General decided, staring hard into Hiccup's face. "You are not qualified. You remain a Rider-since I understand the bond of rider and dragon cannot be dissolved. And you, Lieutenant, will return to your primary function as a medic-I believe you have yet to complete your full trauma training?"

"Yes, Ma'am," I said evenly. Not that I ever slacked and Gothi was very good at keeping on my case for getting competences signed up. I was well ahead of the curve in all areas of my postgraduate training and almost ready to have my Foundation competences all signed off.

"So you will spend the majority of your time in the infirmary though you will attend dragon training and exercises as required," she said. "And you will no longer remain as second in command of the dragon riders." My glare intensified but I took a small breath.

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied dully. It was as Hiccup had warned and I should've expected it, but I hadn't expected her to come in and throw out all the command structures within an hour of arriving. She had no clue about the unit worked-especially with the dragons-but she had made her decision anyway, probably before she ever got here. She was the General: it was her prerogative...but I was really secretly hoping it would go horribly wrong... And then I stiffened, hearing Hiccup breathing hard, angry on my behalf. His hand ghosted towards me and gently touched my hand for an instant, then he looked hard at the General.

"So who will be in charge?" he asked shortly. Her eyebrows raised and she looked surprised.

"That is none of your business," she told him shortly.

"Actually it is," he told her firmly. "I am the lead dragon trainer as well...and no, that post is not negotiable because it is based on my ability to bond with and train dragons, which no one else can match. So I need to know who I will be liaising with and who will be managing my charges." General Zakhysnyk frowned at him, her expression cold.

"I will put my own man, Lieutenant Timothy Thyssen, in charge...with Sergeant Jorgensen as his
"Snotlout?" Hiccup exclaimed, his eyes suddenly crinkling with amusement. "You are putting Snotlout as the senior rider—because this Lieutenant Thyssen certainly isn't a rider."

"Yet," the General said angrily. "And what is your objection to Sergeant Jorgensen?"

"Sorry—have you met him?" Hiccup asked her in shock.

"We have reviewed his last personnel evaluation…the work of Lieutenant Hofferson," Throk snapped. "Though no previous evaluations seem to have been filed…” He glared at me for some reason. I clenched my fists.

"I cannot be held responsible for the actions or omissions of senior officers prior to my arrival at and membership of BERK," I responded shortly, laying the blame squarely where it was due.

"Snotlout…isn't really the best leader," Hiccup tried. "I suggest you look at the reports and assessment of the last exercise he led…it sort of started up as a brawl and went downhill from there…”

"He is your cousin, is he not?" the General asked him pointedly.

"Hardly a secret," Hiccup replied shortly.

"And so jealousy has no part in your attempt to undermine him?" the General accused him calmly. His jaw almost hit the floor and he stared at her. Then he blinked.

"Sorry, I just had an out of body experience," he said sarcastically. "Some idiot thought I was trying to undermine Snotlout! I mean…Snotlout has so much self confidence he could blow up the whole of BERK and still believe he it wasn't his fault and he was the best rider ever—even as Hookfang set him on fire for like the millionth time! To be jealous of Snotlout, he would have to be or have something I want…and he hasn't. Because all I want—Toothless and Astrid—are here. The rest doesn't matter!"

"Did you just call the General an idiot?" Throk menaced him and I saw the man lean forward, his fist clenching. It was clear he harboured immense loyalty to the General…and was her own personal attack dog. That didn't bode well either…

"Did I? Oops. Sorry, just slipped out," he said and grinned at the man, baiting him as deliberately as he had Viggo. And he was pretty sure the man wouldn't punch him in the face for it. Probably. General Zakhysnyk stood and leaned on the desk.

"Keep your opinions to yourself, Specialist Haddock," she snapped. "I have made my judgement and I expect you to obey as any other soldier would. Any insubordination will be treated as if you were a full member of the military personnel of this base…”

"Which is everyone but me anyway," he shot back bitterly. She scowled.

"Dismissed!" she snapped. "You will be informed of your scheduled exercises and training sessions." He stared at her for a long moment then turned away and strode to the door. Then she turned to me. "You too, Lieutenant. Dismissed." I saluted and left, not trusting myself to speak. I really wasn't liking this woman and though I knew I should give her a chance because she was supposed to be a decorated and highly effective officer, I couldn't forget Stoick's reputation before he got to BERK…and look how that turned out.
I found Hiccup in the corridor, seething. He lifted his glittering eyes to me and I could see how frustrated he was so I grabbed his hand and nodded gently. "Easy, babe," I murmured. "At least I don't have to chop your other leg off. You won your bet!"

"Snotlout!" he repeated incredulously. "I mean…you remember the exercise where Heather was taken…?" He stopped, momentarily hit by a pang of guilt but I grabbed his other hand.

"Yeah…it was interesting," I recalled and he managed a small smile. His fingers slid between mine and he raised a hand to his mouth, gently kissing my hand.

"Not sure what I would do without you, Milady," he murmured. "I suspect we aren't going to be favourites with the new management." I shrugged.

"At least you have computers and I have the infirmary," I sighed.

"And we have our dragons," he reminded me, pulling me close and sliding his hands around my waist. "Hmm…I wonder who we need to see about still going on morning flights…because Toothless will be impossible if he can't fly…" I sighed.

"Not sure," I murmured. "It was easier when we just went. I guess it should be the new Lieutenant…or maybe the Operations Officer?" Hiccup's lopsided smile warmed his face.

"I'll ask Gobber," he murmured in my ear and ghosted a kiss on my cheek before pulling away as the door opened and Throk emerged. He glared at us.

"You have duties!" he snapped. I nodded.

"Yes, sir," I replied and headed away, glancing at Hiccup. He winked.

"Yessir, Colonel Throk sir," he said and threw a sarcastic salute at Throk. The man grabbed his shoulder as he turned away and Hiccup stared into a hostile face.

"Don't push me…boy…because I can make your life here very unpleasant," he promised.

"Been there, done that," Hiccup told him, shaking him off. "Now, I believe I have duties to attend to…" And without looking back, he walked away.

oOo

Dinner that evening was an interesting affair, since nobody seemed happy. The Riders all met up and went in together, as usual, and Cami commed Hiccup and I to make sure we were there as a show of solidarity against the newcomers. I met him on the corridor going up to the Mess and he took my hand, giving me a wan smile: it was clear he wasn't happy either but we walked in silence into the Mess, helped ourselves to the Shepherd's pie and veg at the servery and settled at the table with the other Riders. Snotlout was sitting with his face on the table and moaning. he wasn't even eating his meal which was a really bad sign.

"Snot? Are you okay?" Hiccup asked, his voice mildly concerned. He had noticed the lack of eating as well.

"No," was Snotlout's muffled reply. "They've made me field leader."

"And…?" Hiccup asked him calmly, taking a mouthful of pie. Snotlout lifted his head and glanced at them.
"And I already know I can't run an exercise," he protested.

"Mmm?" Hiccup's mouth was full but he was still trying not to smile.

"And I had enough trying to keep them in line when you two went off after the Night Terrors and got captured…I mean, they were impossible!"

"Hey! We weren't impossible!" Gustav protested.

"Just very not possible," Tuffnut added cheerfully.

"And you didn't exactly give clear orders!" Ruff added.

"What part of shut up and stop firing at Gustav didn't I make clear?" Snotlout growled.

"Um, the time scale?" Ruff suggested.

"AARGH!" Snotlout shouted. "And they want reports on everything!" He paused and stared at me. "Hey, babe…" he began.

"Snotlout," I growled.

"Lieutenant babe?" he asked hopefully.

"Hadh'n't you heard? I'm just a simple rider and base medic," I told him sweetly. "While Hiccup here is a mere IT tech." There was an eruption of noise from the other riders and an avalanche of protests along the line of 'You've gotta be kidding? 'Are they insane? 'No one can run the unit like Hiccup!' 'The dragons won't accept it!' He swallowed and shrugged.

"Gee thanks, guys," he said with a small smile. "I guess we'll just have to see what happens…"
Then he paused. "But no, Snot-I'm not doing your reports either!"

"I officially hate you," Snotlout grumbled and turned to his pie, shovelling the food in. "What? I need to keep my strength up! All this beauty needs its fuel and rest…"

"And that's another thing," Tuff grumbled. "The new officer seems to think our fitness isn't A1. So he's started us all on an intensive programme of physical conditioning…" I chewed thoughtfully. They probably weren't as fit as they should be-because though riding definitely built up stamina and muscle tone, it didn't make them battle ready…I hadn't seen one of them on the running tracks and only Eret and Snotlout in the gym. I had taken Hiccup through some simple combat moves and at the shooting range but I knew no one else had been through. And I knew as well it had been the line command who had to specify the fitness regime for the operational staff…though there was some personal responsibility. Maybe I should have worked them harder in the short time I had been there…like that would have worked…

"And we've all been assigned weapons practice," Eret added and he gave me a grin. "Though I guess you-and Hiccup-have been keeping up some practice?" I nodded. I was very proud of my weapons rating: I had already checked that I had been assigned sessions in the range.

"Hmm-she seems determined to turn me into a marksman," Hiccup put in with a proud smile. "At least I can fire in the correct direction…" I smiled: I could never forget he saved my life from Dagur and he met my eyes, lowering his after a second. It was still a painful subject.

"Throk to Haddock. Can you and Lieutenant Hofferson come to my office now. An irregularity has just come to my attention. Out."
I stared at Hiccup's com and he shrugged. "I guess no pudding tonight," he sighed.

"I'll grab you both one and put it in the Rec room," Cami offered and I nodded in gratitude, shovelling the last mouthful in: all medics learn to eat really fast and I was no exception. I rose, nodded to the Riders who were all giving us thumbs-up signs and we left together. Hiccup was looking tense and I wondered what had gone wrong now.

"Are you okay, babe?" I asked him and he paused then frowned, his eyes dark with concern.

"If we're lucky, it'll just be Throk vetoing me from using the range and learning to shoot," he said quietly. I stared at him; his brow was furrowed and he was looking worried.

"And if we're not…?" I asked. He paused and glanced at me.

"Do you trust me, Milady?" he asked softly.

"You know it, babe," I reassured him and he ghosted a smile.

"Then let me do the talking," he asked and I paused. I preferred to speak for myself but he was looking as if he was planning something and he had asked me to trust him. I nodded.

"Okay," I conceded, seeing his lips tilt in a small smile. We arrived at the door and Hiccup knocked, then opened the door to allow me to enter first when we were called in. We walked up to the desk and I saluted. Throk eyed me for a long moment before saluting and telling me to stand at ease. Hiccup folded his arms and looked warily at the Colonel. Close up, the man looked permanently annoyed, his eyes hard and unfriendly. And I had a nasty suspicion he was trying to make his mark on the Base already.

"There is an irregularity in the accommodation," Throk announced and I saw Hiccup stiffen. Was this what he had been worried about? "The accommodation is definitely co-ed…"

"Each quarters is single occupancy with its own washing facilities…so that seems pretty irrelevant," Hiccup commented. "And I dare you to move the twins more than a wall apart anyway!" Throk glared at him and I got the impression neither man liked the other-at all.

"But you and the Lieutenant are occupying married quarters," the Colonel snapped. Hiccup raised an eyebrow.

"Again, true," he shot back nonchalantly.

"Can I remind you that this is hardly a soap opera where you can just move in with your girlfriend…" Throk sneered. "I cannot authorise this. You will have to move into appropriate single quarters…"

"Oh, come on!" Hiccup snapped at him in exasperation, unfolding his arms and gesturing. "Eighteen new people have just arrived in need of quarters and we are going to be tight—but you want to move us out into two more separate quarters. Why? Do you want our room?" There was a pause and my teeth gritted at the implication. Hiccup's eyes widened. "You do, don't you?" he purred in a low voice. "When all you are entitled to is a single quarters, same as everyone else except the General, who gets her own suite!"

"You aren't entitled to any quarters at all…" Throk snapped. "You are a civilian…"

"Actually, I'm a member of BERK," Hiccup snapped. "I am entitled to quarters because I am required to live on base permanently as a Dragon Rider. And I am still owed five years of back
"You have been paid...a hundred pounds...a month...from your second year here..." he read and his voice trailed away, eyes popping at the pittance.

"Allowance from my father," Hiccup revealed. "But as I was working in IT from the time I started here, I am entitled to full pay." Throk's eyes narrowed.

"But I cannot have the two of you..." Hiccup leaned forward, his green eyes narrowing at the Colonel.

"You can and you will," he growled. "I've checked the regulations and we are entitled to have couple's quarters...because we are cohabiting...and engaged."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Zakhysnyk= Defender in Ukrainian (according to Google translate and Tanya from Kiev who I met on holiday). Apologies if this is not entirely accurate but I'm sticking with it!
"We are entitled to have couple's quarters...because we are cohabiting...and engaged."

I stiffened at Hiccup's words and watched Throk's face at my boyfriend's declaration. The Colonel had gone red and his eyes flashed in fury, glaring furiously at Hiccup. But Hiccup's hand gently stretched back and closed around mine, his warm touch comforting. I opened my hand and laced my fingers with his.

"That is not in your records," Throk growled. Hiccup gave an ironic smile.

"Obviously not keeping up with the soap opera," he snarked. The Colonel paused, breathing hard then turned away.

"Dismissed," he snapped.

"So we're staying?" Hiccup clarified.

"That's what I said!" Throk snapped.

"Actually you didn't," Hiccup pointed out obviously, "otherwise I wouldn't have needed to check." I gripped his hand tighter.

"I will change accommodation assignments but you are permitted to keep your quarters," Throk growled with obvious reluctance and sat down. "Now get out of my office!" I saluted and Hiccup grinned, then hauled me out. Once in the corridor, we made it all the way to the end before I stopped and pulled him round to face me. His green eyes were sparkling with triumph and I looked deep into the emerald depths.

"So we're engaged, Dragon Boy?" I asked him directly, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. His hands closed over mine, fingers softly stroking the back of my hand. His eyes were suddenly uncertain.

"Um...not really but if you want to...I mean I understand but I didn't want you to move out and so I just said...um yeah...sorry..." he mumbled, his confidence suddenly evaporating.

"Did you just propose?" I asked him.

"Um...not sure," he admitted. I smiled and leaned up into a kiss.

"Tell you what...you decide if you want to or not and when you do, I'll give you an answer," I told him and he kissed me back.

"Good enough," he said, wrapping an arm around me. I slid my arm around his narrow waist and leaned against him. We walked along for a few moments and then he shifted slightly to look at me. "Um...Astrid...you didn't mind, did you?" he added softly.

_Did I mind? _I mean, I fell for him really when he was in my apartment, sick and cute and sarcastic and clever. I followed him to BERK because I wanted the adventure...but I wanted Hiccup more. I
made sure he knew I was his friend and fell in love with him… and though we had a few rocky
moments… with his temper and complete self-sacrificing idiocy, my stupidity and hot-
headedness… I was never in doubt he actually loved me. I was probably the first girl he had
loved… and certainly the first he had made love to… and while I had had sex before, he was also
the first man I actually loved.

But did I want to spend my life with him? I knew Mum and Dad had been happy until the day they
died— and they met at College and fell in love in a whirlwind romance. My Mum always told me
that I would know the man when I met him… and Gran always told me it was love at first sight
with Gramps. I knew I had scoffed when I was younger… but Hiccup was kind and caring and
brilliant and brave and he loved me. I loved him.

I smiled. "Not at all," I reassured him. "Hm… I just hope Snotlout hasn’t eaten our puddings." He
pouted.

"I like where I am in your list of priorities," he sighed.

"Babe—I love you to pieces but pudding is pudding!" I grinned and he kissed the top of my hair.

"And afterwards?" he asked, his voice very hopeful. I leaned against him.

"I’m really tired," I smiled. "Bed?" He nodded.

"Better enjoy it before Throk does something else to ruin it," he said.

Waking up with Hiccup was definitely one of the nicest things about life in BERK. He was a
fantastic hot water bottle, a very good blanket and had the advantage of being an excellent kisser.
He wasn’t a morning person but he got up when pushed… or occasionally drenched. Every
morning, we showered and dressed, left the room together, breakfasted and then went to our
separate assigned duties. Back in the infirmary, I was doing well with Gothi, brushing up on those
competences and running simulations as a team leader. Dragon Training had been cancelled for
three weeks now due to gales and the dragons were just exercising in Pen One… and getting very
cranky. I put my energies in getting my 5k time down on the track but I knew Hiccup had managed
to get permission to sneak out for an afternoon on Toothless— much to the annoyance of everyone
else. He had come back absolutely soaked, frozen and late, so he had his ass chewed off by Throk
before being sent to change.

The Riders, though, were hugely pissed off because Snotlout couldn’t control them but shouted a
lot and tried to get Hookfang to set fire to them. He had run half a dozen sessions before Lieutenant
Timothy Thyssen, our new commanding officer, finally joined the group. He was tall, buff, dark-
eyed and handsome… and seriously had a crush on himself. He marched in, a clipboard in hand,
uniform immaculate and stared at the motley assembled riders: the twins were looking particularly
scruffy, Snotlout was still smoking from Hookfang’s latest attempt to incinerate him while Gustav
was laughing helplessly. Bucket and Mulch were fussing over Blanche’s left forepaw, which they
though she may have strained during a heavy landing and Cami was bouncing with energy and
teasing Eret mercilessly. Hiccup and I were settled quietly at one side, watching with amusement.

"Silence, you horrible shower of dragon shit!" Thyssen snapped. "I am Lieutenant Timothy
‘Thuggory’ Thyssen but you can call me God!"

"I think that breaches equality and diversity legislation!" I pointed out.
"I'm polytheistic myself so I am sure Odin and the Aesir won't worry," Hiccup joined in cheerfully.

"Loki will!" Tuff commented.

"LOKI!" Ruff shouted. They butted heads and staggered.

"Did anyone hear him call himself Thuggory?" Gustav asked the group in general. "Now if you changed the T to a B…"

"And you need to stop that thought right there or I will ask Toothless to eat you," I snapped.

"And they still only eat fish," Hiccup reminded me.

"He probably doesn't remember that!" I hissed back, seeing Gustav gulp nervously and take a worried step away from the Night Fury, who was cleaning his paw calmly, oblivious to his new status as man-eating monster.

"Unbelievable," Hiccup sighed and started as Snotlout ripped off a textbook salute and grinned.

"Sergeant Snotlout Jorgensen, ready for duty…sah!" he announced proudly. Thyssen…or Thuggory (Honestly! Why?) looked utterly shocked and then he blinked.

"Everyone-to attention!" he bellowed. Hookfang turned his back to the new lieutenant in disgust, almost knocking Snotlout over in the process. I managed not to grin…but it was really hard. Thuggory stared at me in mild shock. "Are you sure this is a military unit?" he asked. I made an apologetic face.

"It's more like a long-running argument," I explained. "With added dragons."

"Did you actually threaten one of the Riders?" Thuggory asked me pointedly. I hiked up an eyebrow.

"It's Gustav," I said calmly. "With the best will in the world, sir, not a lot else will get through. And anyway, the dragons only eat fish…which Gustav should know…"

"I am in charge of discipline in this unit!" Thuggory snapped.

"Yes, sir!" I snapped. "Good luck!" He glared…but I forced myself to smile back, taking Hiccup's advice. He had explained to me that he was as frustrated as the rest of us with the new officers and their inflexible and deliberate dismantling of all BERK's hierarchy without even seeing what worked and what didn't, but he had decided to appear calm and smiling. His reasoning was typically Hiccup: they couldn't say anything about his calm response to their unpleasantness (though I hadn't the heart to remind him of his whip-smart sarcasm) and it was in fact really irritating in its own right. And, damn him, he was actually right. Because he never rose to their bait and the new officers all got more and more angry at his control.

Of course, I got a diatribe about every ounce of his frustration, anger and disappointment at night in the privacy of our room…because he desperately needed to offload somewhere. He confided he would never voluntarily leave BERK: though he probably could with his IT qualifications and walk into a far better job, his heart was with the dragons and Toothless, no matter how badly the humans treated him. He was confident one day soon, they would need him because frankly, no one else could lead the Riders. And he patiently listened to my woes as well, calming me as I did him: with a hug and a kiss that often led to more. And that calmed us both…eventually…

Thuggory turned back to his unit and checked his clipboard, fixating on the twins. He looked at
"That is a Zippleback, right?" he said confidently, staring at the two-headed dragon.

"Dude, that is THE Zippleback!" Tuff told him obviously.

"Barf and Belch," Ruff amended cheerfully.

"The most destructive dragon in BERK!" Tuff grinned.

"Hey! Fanghook is far more destructive!" Gustav argued. "You just blow stuff up. I can burn them down as well!"

"Private, I am not talking to you!" Thuggory snapped.

"He's dissing my dragon!" Gustav protested. "Fangie-you show him why you're the greatest!"

"Oh, come on!" Snotlout suddenly said, jumping in. "Hookfang is far more destructive than Fanghook!" Fanghook bust into flames with a roar as Hookfang lumbered round, gave an answering roar and erupted into flames as well.

"Is not!"

"Is TOO!"

I smirked and caught Hiccup chuckling beside me. Thuggory was gradually going red with fury.

"SHUT UP!" he shouted. "I want you all to mount up and prepare for some standard exercises."

"What exercises?" Cami asked pointedly.

"What do you mean what exercises?" Thuggory asked them, exasperated.

"Well, we haven't done any sort of standard exercises since Captain Dragon Boy started us flying about three years ago..."

"Captain Dragon Boy?" Thuggory asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Actually, it was Captain Useless or Captain Dork in those days," Eret piped up, a grin twisting his face. Hiccup cast him a scowl: he hated being reminded of how badly he had been treated by his fellow Riders, the constant blizzard of abuse that had surrounded him for years.

"It was Commander Dragon Boy anyway," Ruff reminded them.

"Just Specialist Dragon Boy now," Hiccup muttered. I leaned over and touched his hand.

"Still my Private Dragon Boy," I whispered and a small smile tilted his lips, his fingers trailing across mine.

"ATTEN-SHUN!" Thuggory shouted as he watched Snotlout and Gustav continue to argue, their flaming dragons roaring at one another. The twins were egging them on-as were Cami and Eret. I gave up trying to comply with attention in the absence of anyone else joining in and drifted over to Hiccup, leaning back against him and feeling his arms wrap comfortingly around me. I gently rested my head back against his chest.

"Should we help him?" I asked softly. There was a pause and I felt his fingers drift lightly over my
"We will if he asks," he decided. "They decreed they didn't need us, Milady. If they want us, we're here." He kissed the top of my head. "But until then, we can watch and enjoy the madness-knowing we don't have to sort it out!"

In the end, Thuggory was so furious set us all to do a 10k run round the track-which was no skin off my nose but which had Hiccup complaining that he wasn't military and wasn't required to do this. Thuggory took the matter to Throk-who immediately commanded Hiccup to do the run and escorted him personally along to the start. I was ready, changed and warming up but Hiccup just walked up to the start and sighed.

"You okay, babe?" I asked him as I stretched. He shook his head.

"My prosthesis isn't built for running long distance and I haven't properly run since I lost my leg," he murmured. "And didn't really before either. Making me do a six mile run with no training isn't going to help anything."

"I'll stay with you," I decided, seeing him worry about how his stump would cope. There was still a lot of relatively fresh scar tissue there from Dagur's abuse and I guessed that he would really suffer later on. But he shook his head.

"You go ahead," he told me with a small smile. "I know you can do this…and you need to show these mutton-heads that we aren't all bad soldiers…" I stared into his thoughtful forest green gaze and frowned.

"You are plotting something, babe," I murmured.

"Me, Milady? When have I ever plotted anything?"

"All the time," I reminded him and he flashed his cute lopsided smile.

"Go on and kill them," he urged me as Thuggory called us to the line, then set us off. The moment he called it, my competitive instincts took over and I shot away, getting up to speed and then settling into a steady pace. Snotlout, Eret, Gustav and Fishlegs came with me while the twins raced ahead-though I knew they would run out of steam before the end. Cami was lagging behind, wisely setting off at her own pace while Bucket and Mulch set off much more slowly but steadily. I didn't see Hiccup at all, just those around me. As I came round for the second lap, Throk had vanished but Thuggory was still there, timing us and looking bored and frustrated. I was worried as I pulled ahead on the second lap and really set my sights on a good time. On the third and final lap, I was lapping the others-Bucket, Mulch, Gustav, the twins but there was still no sign of my boyfriend so I concentrated on winning and doing a good time. I finished well ahead of the others…

And it was only as I was panting, resting my hands on my knees and catching my breath when I asked Thuggory where Hiccup was. His reply was very simple:

"He's in the brig."

Colonel Mildew was probably the most irritating man I had ever met. His hair stuck out wildly from the side of his head, forming a fringe around his bald pate. His mean face had a pointy nose and sly, dark eyes. He voice just grated as he leaned forward and refused me permission to see my boyfriend.
"I ain't seeing any authorisation from yer superior officer to see 'im," he pointed out.

"Well, at least tell me why he's in here, sir!' I asked, trying not to sound exasperated. Colonel Mildew paused and his mean eyes narrowed.

"Not sure yer have the right ter…” he whined and I gritted my teeth.

"Sir! He is my fiancé and I am his next of kin. I have every right to know…" I paused. "I am also his defence counsel…” Mildew glared at me.

"He refused to do the run,” he sneered. "He argued with Colonel Throk. In the end, I think he may have called the man a few names. Throk cited him for insubordination."

"And put him in a cell?” I snapped, really not believing my ears.

"I see respect for the chain of command is in short supply in BERK,’ Mildew sniped.

"No, sir," I said briskly. "The chain of command is completely respected. The individuals, on the other hand…are treated as their performance deserves." I saluted and marched out, heading straight up to the General's office. I was hot, sweaty and furious…but I knew if I stopped to think about it, I wouldn't go through with facing off against that cold-faced bitch, General Mala Zakhysnyk. I knocked, heard her invite me in and entered-to see her at the desk and that bastard Throk standing facing her.

"Ah, Lieutenant," the General said calmly. "I was expecting you."

*Expecting me? Ah…they must know I was Hiccup's staunchest defender. Well, he is the man I love…*

"I am glad to meet expectations, Ma'am," I forced myself to say lightly. She sat and motioned me to stand at ease. I complied and faced her.

"I presume you are here to argue for Specialist Haddock," she said smugly and I saw Throk give a nasty smile. I nodded.

"I believe his treatment is unethical and contravenes the Equalities Act, which is in force since this base is sited on British soil and BERK operating procedures indicate that such matters are governed by local law…for civilian members of staff," I stated flatly. Throk's smile wavered a fraction. Good. They had removed his rank and his pseudo military status: they couldn't have it both ways. General Zakhysnyk leaned forward, her fingers steepled.

"Presume I am not familiar with this piece of law," she said in her precise delivery. Her English was excellent: i just hoped her ability to treat her people fairly was as good.

"Ma'am-I presume you are aware that Hiccup has a physical disability?" I asked. She nodded.

"His left lower leg..?"

"A traumatic amputation after a dragon attack," I clarified calmly. "However, under the previous regime, he was never given a proper programme of physical rehabilitation and he has persisting issues with his stump…due in no small part due to the deliberate actions of traitors who caused severe injuries to the area…" The General frowned.

"I hardly see…"
"Hiccup is not a soldier...on that we all agree," I pointed out. She paused and nodded. "Therefore, there is no required standard for fitness...and insisting that an unfit disabled man with an unmodified prosthetic undertake a 10k run is unreasonable. You are required by law to make reasonable adjustments to an employee's workplace with respect to a disability—and it would not be unreasonable to exempt him from the run or allow him to walk it or a travel a shorter distance. I believe neither was on offer. Hiccup was fully within his rights to refuse...especially as I know his stump has been inflamed recently and is very painful." The General stared at me and the turned to Throk.

"Is this true, Igor?" she asked calmly. He scowled.

"He refused and said he shouldn't do the run," he growled. "Said he couldn't. If we work him hard enough, he will eventually..." Mala Zakhysnyk rolled her eyes.

"Hiccup Haddock is not a soldier and he has a prosthetic leg," she said firmly. "He is not an athlete and informed you he could not do the run. His refusal is entirely...allowed. Release him."

"But...he was insubordinate!" Throk growled. "He called me a..." I stared straight ahead, not meeting anyone's eyes, but I could see the General note my lips twitch.

"Then you can decree he has some sort of punishment duty," she suggested. "I believe dragon dung duty is the usual choice, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied smartly. "Very popular among the Riders." She gave a small smile.

"I will inform Colonel Mildew myself," she said evenly. "You may go and fetch your friend, Lieutenant." I saluted.

"Thank you, Ma'am," I replied.

"You may want to suggest to Hiccup Haddock that he may wish to improve his fitness levels, despite his disability," General Zakhysnyk commented as I turned to the door. I paused for a long moment.

"I'll let him know, Ma'am," I said as I headed out the office.

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Colonel Mildew was really unpleasant, bending my ear about how Hiccup should be confined in a military prison for at least a month and how he would be on bread and water rations if Mildew had anything to do with it... I had to just stand there and nod and wait for him to finally obey General Zakhysnyk's orders and release him. Finally, two MPs escorted the familiar tall and lanky shape of Hiccup into the office. His green eyes were wary but they brightened as they landed on me and he gave a small smile.

"Ah, there yer are, Specialist 'Addock," Mildew sneered. "It's yer lucky day. General Zakhilnit 'as decided yer can serve dragon dung duty fer a fortnight instead of jail fer yer insubordination!"


"Yer a sarcastic little bastard, 'Iccup, and I'm gonna be there when we breaks yer!" the Colonel threatened him.
"You know, better men than you have tried," Hiccup sighed, staring down into the Colonel's eyes. "But I shall look forward to it."

"Get outta me sight!" Mildew sneered and Hiccup gave him a small grin. He even tipped the Colonel a small salute and winked at me as he left. Mildew glared at me. "Dismissed…but yer better tell 'im I'm watchin' 'im!"

"Yessir!" I said briskly, marching out before closing the door more firmly than was necessary. I was steaming…but calmed a little as I saw the shape leaning against the wall, his messy auburn hair and sparkling green eyes highlighted against the white-painted metal. I stared up into his face and sighed. "You could try getting along with him a bit…" I murmured as he beckoned me close and gently wrapped his arms around me. He gently kissed the top of my head.

"Like you?" he teased me gently and I looked up into his warm green eyes.

"He's an ass," I grumbled. His hand rose to stroke my cheek.

"You got me out, didn't you?" he said softly.

"Yeah…but…" I paused. I wasn't sure how he would feel about what I had said. He frowned slightly and stroked my cheek again.

"Milady?" he said softly. "You used the metal leg, right?" I nodded, my cheeks flushed with shame.

"Um, yeah…well, it seemed to be the obvious reason why you shouldn't be on that run…but I mean you're amazing and in no way disabled and…" He silenced me with a kiss on the lips-light and gentle but enough to stop me rambling. His gaze was understanding.

"I think we have to accept I have a disability," he told me with understanding, "and I have no problem with you using it quite reasonably in your argument to get me off that damned run…" I sighed.

"General Zakhysnyk did mention you need to improve your fitness," I mumbled.

"I may have to get Toothless to chew my other leg off," he grumbled. "I am not getting fit enough to run 10k, Milady." I ran my fingers through his messy hair.

"You need to do dragon dung duty as well," I reminded him as he slid an arm over my shoulders and began to steer me away from the Security Office. "Sorry, babe-I'm sweaty and horrible…" I mumbled but he pulled me close as we walked and I felt him kiss my hair again.

"I hadn't noticed," he murmured softly. "You always smell fragrant…"

"Fragrant?"

"Um…trying to be nice to my sweaty but violent girlfriend…" he said dryly and I growled slightly but stopped as I felt him limping slightly. His leg was paining him, no matter how bravely he hid it and my arms tightened around his lean torso.

"Shall we get you checked out in the infirmary, babe?" I asked softly. "That leg isn't improving." He paused and we limped along silently for a moment, then nodded.

"I was just thinking about what Viggo said," he murmured, wincing slightly. "He's got a tracker implanted in me somewhere and we need to find it, don't we?" I nodded thoughtfully.
"We can use the CT scanner in the infirmary to locate it...and presumably we can take it out under image intensification..." I mused. He sighed.

"Great," he said sarcastically. "My favourite part of the base..." I tightened my grip around him and smiled as his defensive sarcasm: he really didn't like being poked and prodded by medics...except me... His warm hand covered mine and his fingers curled.

"Babe, I'll be with you," I assured him and his face turned to inspect me, his sparkling emerald gaze filling with gratitude.

"Then I'll go through whatever they want," he sighed, his grip tightening. "I'm not letting Viggo get the better of me..."

His com alarmed and we both jumped...and then Gobber's voice boomed from the mike.

"Laddie? It's me!" he bellowed. Hiccup winced, disentangled his hand from mine and raised his com to his lips.

"Kinda guessed that, Gobber," he said in an embarrassed tone. "Any chance of dialling the volume down. I could hear you without the com..."

"Ah...nae problem, laddie!" Gobber bellowed. "Yer window in the weather has come up. If ye want tae go, now is the time. I've authorised it so dinnae let me down, laddie!"

"Thanks, Gobber..." he said, his voice determined, closing the line. "Okay, Milady...I need your help in this..." he said to me. "I managed to file a flight plan via Gobber and I have a theory I need to test..."

"Hmm...and you didn't discuss this with Thuggory...or Throk?" I asked quietly. His face tightened in a look I hadn't really seen before: he actually intensely disliked the Colonel and I guessed the feeling was mutual.

"Throk would throw me in the brig before indulge one of my experiments," he murmured and then he gave me a serious look. "We're on the clock, Milady. We need to suit up and fly!"

"Urgh, babe-I am so sweaty and horrible!" I protested but his arm tightened around me.

"Please...this is really important," he said in a low voice and I saw the urgency in his eyes as we sped up to our room, rapidly getting into the flight suits and heading down to the Pens. Hiccup was willing to risk a jog to Pen One, even though his leg was clearly paining him because there was a real sense of urgency there. We launched from the External Door of Pen One and rocketed up into the grey sky...and then I saw it...

There was a window in the weather, a glorious gap towards the west where the setting sun had turned the sky to orange and gold fire, the light gilding the edges of the thick grey clouds that still shrouded the Highlands. We flapped up and Stormfly followed Toothless, clearly delighted to be outside and stretching her wings after the accelerating Night Fury. I leaned low over her neck and felt her settle into the flight as we swooped and soared. Hiccup was unusually silent, lying low over Toothless, his lean shape taut.

"Babe-what's this about...?" I asked over the com but he shook his head, pointing forward. He banked tightly and flapped up, slowing and circling a mountain peak, bringing Toothless down to a perfect landing. With a screech to her friend, Stormfly backwinged and landed by him, shaking her head and flapping her wings before preening herself as I slid the the uneven ground. Hiccup carefully unclipped his prosthetic leg from the tail assembly and walked to my side. He glanced at
the glorious sunset over the mountains and smiled.

"I've been waiting for that for weeks," he sighed, then turned back to me, his emerald eyes wide with affection and hope. "Astrid-I know I haven't known you for very long but I already know that you are the most amazing and wonderful person. You picked up some stranger with some 'frankly preposterous' story who was ill and in desperate trouble and you gave him...gave me help and protection. And when I ran away to protect you, you came after me. You saved my life again." He sighed. "And I really didn't want to leave, even though I had to try to protect you because I had found the most perfect woman...you...and I had totally fallen in love with you..."

"This doesn't sound like an experiment," I told him, feeling his hands tighten on mine. He gave a small smile.

"Oh, but it is," he said huskily. "Astrid, I know I don't have much to offer you, except my love and undying devotion...and all this raw Vikingness, of course..." I smiled and dipped my head. I was holding my breath and my heart was pounding in my chest. He leaned closer to me, a warm finger lifting my chin so he could look lovingly into my eyes. "But I have to ask...because you are perfect to me...smart and caring and beautiful and brave and strong..."

He gulped and lowered himself to one knee. "I have to ask...and I understand if you say 'no' because, Hel, I would. I mean, most of the last few months has been Hel on legs and wouldn't really encourage anyone to want to stay with me...I mean I seem to completely attract trouble and chaos wherever I go and nothing seems to run smoothly when I'm around..."

"Hiccup... kinda getting off point," I reminded him gently and he blinked then looked embarrassed.

"See? I guess you really wouldn't want to..."

"Hiccup? Want to WHAT?" I said more sternly. Idiot had gone at a tangent before he got to the point. But I knew his brilliant and inventive mind tended to turn to mush when he had to have a very personal or difficult conversation with me. My mind drifted back to that time in the cell as he had tried to explain why he had appeared to join the Dragon Hunters... He sighed.

"Will you marry me?" he asked me in a rush. "I mean, I understand if you say no because I'm so..."

"Yes."

"...useless and I've completely messed this up...I mean I couldn't be more dorky if I tried..."

"Yes."

"...and I completely messed up that explanation before and what was I thinking...?"

"Yes."

"...I mean I probably ought just get up and walk away now because there's no way you would ever want to be with such an utter screw-up like me..."

"Yes."

"...so I really...what?" His jaw dropped and he stumbled to silence as his brain caught up with his ears and his wide emerald eyes stared up into mine. "Really?"

"Yes." I was sounding like a broken record but I was giggling now because, honestly, it was a
relief to finally be asked. *Had I thought about it?* Honestly—since he had used it as an excuse to keep our joint accommodation and then sort of dreadfully clumsily asked me but not really, I was waiting for him to try again…but I hadn't expected him to sneak us out of the base for…this…a proposal in the sunset on the peak of Ben Nevis. Boy, for an amateur at romance, he was a quick study. His face lit with a grin of delight and he levered himself up to his feet, wincing as he put pressure through his stump, reminding me we really had to get that looked at.

"That's great!" he said, sounding utterly dorky. "I mean…thanks, Milady." He leaned into a kiss and my arms slid up round his neck as he pulled me close…and then he pulled away. "Oh. Oh! I've forgotten something!" he said in a panic, a hand patting his belt pouch and retrieving a small box. He fumbled then flipped it open and offered me the ring: a simple but elegant solitaire diamond in a gold band that was carved with simple Viking motifs. My eyes popped wide: this must have cost him pretty much every penny he had…and his eyes were filled with pride as he slipped it onto the ring finger of my left hand. Needless to say it was a perfect fit—the sneaky so and so had obviously measured my finger at some point…

"She said yes, bud!" he announced happily, sweeping me up in his arms and spinning me round as the dragons roared in triumph. His lips pressed against mine and I wrapped my arms around him, deepening the kiss. We stuttered to a stop and ended up lost in the kiss…until we broke for air.

"I love you," I said breathlessly. "It's beautiful. I really mean it, Hiccup. This is…perfect…"

"Until I messed it up," he muttered, a small self-conscious smile tilting his mouth. I leaned against him, feeling his warmth seep into me.

"It was perfect, babe," I assured him. "I love you. I want to marry you. And I don't wanna be with anyone else."

He kissed me again…and I melted against him, feeling his arms wrap strongly around me, making me feel protected and loved…and then our coms buzzed. And again. Reluctantly, we pulled apart.

"Any my experiment failed," he sighed. "Not possible to sneak off for a little personal time…maybe even a social appointment…without being interrupted." I sighed and rested my head against his chest as he lifted his com towards his mouth. "Haddock. Go!" he said brusquely.

"Hiccup—it's Fishlegs!" Hiccup sighed.

"Can't it wait?" he sighed.

"It could. It could…but it shouldn't…" the other Rider said urgently. "The base is in lockdown. Someone has let the dragons out of the Pens…and your Speed Stingers are causing chaos!"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, they never get a break, do they?
"Fishlegs," Hiccup said with forced calm, "what the Hel happened?" There was a pause and the com crackled.

"Someone unlocked the gates to the Pens," he admitted.

"Someone? Not the twins?" Hiccup checked.

"No-they were with everyone else when the doors opened and the alarms all went off," Fishlegs told us. I frowned.

"All the Pens are open?" I asked and Hiccup nodded. "So the insane Changewing is free?" He froze and nodded.

"Odin," he breathed. "Keep all the staff on their quarters until I get back. Do not-I repeat DO NOT-attempt to recapture them."

"Why? I think security are already…"

"Fish-Shimmer will be out!" Hiccup said urgently. "You know how disturbed he has been since Dog…well…fell…"

"Understatement," Fishlegs sighed, "but not sure Colonel Mildew will believe you-or General Zakhysnyk."

"Show them the video of when Savage and Amund broke into Pen Seven," I advised him shortly and shuddered. Sometimes, the image of Savage melting under the acid from the Changewing came back to me and I still broke out in a cold sweat: it was the single most horrific thing I had ever witnessed.

"I'm not sure I could wrangle him…but I have Toothless and his Alpha mode may calm him down a little," Hiccup sighed.

"Where are you anyway?" Fishlegs asked curiously, realising we weren't on the base.

"Ben Nevis," I grumped.

"What are you doing up there?"

"Oh, let me think…trying to have some private time!" I snapped.

"But how did you…?" he gabbled on curiously.

"Fishlegs, Hiccup just proposed to me-literally. Just. When you blundered in…" I growled.

There was an awkward pause and Hiccup grimaced, feeling bad for the object of my ire.

"Sorry..." Fishlegs said in a small voice. "Um...congratulations...but I thought you were already engaged..."

"I told him to do it properly," I sighed, "and being Hiccup, he managed to find a glorious sunset,
the highest peak in the United Kingdom and complete isolation with our dragons to pop the question incredible romantically...most of which consisted of him forgetting to actually ask me and telling me the reasons why I shouldn't marry him. And then he failed to notice I had said yes about five times!"

There was sniggering from over the com. "The others will love this," Fish said more cheerfully. "I'm sure Ruff and Cami will be aching to see your ring..."

"Fish...check for external coms and...which Protocol was activated?" Hiccup asked urgently.

"Loki," Fishlegs said. "Is that bad?"

"Get into your rooms now! The base will go into shutdown any minute unless someone activates the Odin override!" Hiccup shouted.

"Okay, I'll....."

The Com went dead. I stared at Hiccup, whose face had gone pale.

"Hiccup?" I asked him gently, His hand found mine but his face was desperately worried. "What is Loki Protocol?" His grip tightened.

"It's been activated in error in response to an external attack on BERK," he told me softly.

"What, you have a Protocol that lets the dragons out?"

"No, the dragons being let out was the attack," he told me slowly, his brow furrowed as he tried to calculate what had happened. "The interference was detected by the Firewall—which was probably breached because I...um...may have unwillingly demonstrated how to do it when I was Drago's...unwilling ally..." He blushed. "But I installed more backups afterwards...but Loki was one I wouldn't EVER choose, because it isolates the base completely, severing external coms, locking all doors and shutting down ventilation and life support."

"Why the Hell could anyone be stupid enough to effectively entomb themselves in the mountain?" I asked. Hiccup swallowed.

"If there was a leak," he murmured. "Either from the Reactor...and we do have a small nuclear reactor for unlimited self-sustaining power, buried deep under the lowest basement level...or if there was a biological breach..."

"Meaning...?"

"Dragons are a species isolated from the biosphere and the modern ecosystem by over a thousand years," he reminded me. "There was a small possibility that they would bring back with them novel bacteria or viral particles against which we would have no defence..."

"You mean ancient...but I understand," I murmured with a chill. "So you commit mass suicide to save the modern biosphere?" He rubbed the back of his neck, looking embarrassed.

"Um...yeah..." he murmured. "In my defence, we had to develop it under Dad's commands. I always thought it was stupid because giving up is never a great idea. There always has to be another option..."

"So you developed it?" I guessed.
"With Ozzie and the full team," he admitted. "It was a really big team effort—and a fantastically complex piece of software…" I leaned against him and looked up into his worried face.

"So what do we do?" I asked him and my mouth lifted in a small smile—because I knew my fiancé. "How do we get back in?" He immediately looked guilty so I knew I had guessed right.

"The air vent by the back door under Pen Seven," he murmured. "It's a negative pressure feed so I left it unblocked…because air cannot get out, only in…" He gave me a small kiss.

"And when we get back in?" I asked. He sighed.

"We have to get up to the main servers in the ninth level and activate the Odin override before we run out of air or get eaten by angry Changewings," he told me carefully.

"I suppose going wedding shopping is out of the question?" I asked him. He sighed.

"I'm almost broke…since they still haven't paid me…and I think all the shops are closed by now," he suggested with a small grin. I kissed him lightly.

"So we get to explore the ducts of BERK?" I asked him and he gave a small smile.

"Not the social appointment I had in mind," he admitted.

"Dragon Boy, you know how to show a girl a good time!" I smirked as we mounted up our dragons. "Ducts. It's always ducts…"

"Hey, when did you crawl around air ducts before?" he asked me in a suspicious voice. "Have you been having fun without me, Milady?"

"When we were escaping from Drago's kidnapping!" I reminded him. He frowned and gave a small shrug.

"That will explain why I can't recall anything!" he grumbled, though he frowned a little and I could see he was struggling—because he had been badly hurt when Cami and I dragged him through and out. But he stroked Toothless then flashed me a gentle smile and I found myself grinning back. "Shall we, Milady? Sooner we get this sorted out, sooner you can show off your ring…um…if you want to, that is…"

"Idiot," I grumbled. "I will be flashing this everywhere…as soon as you finish saving the Base…"

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It had started raining by the time we landed back at base, a cold persistent rain that chilled us even in our insulated flight suits. Toothless gave a grumpy warble, flicking his tail and causing Hiccup to have to apologise and soothe him. I could guess the Night Fury was complaining about the lack of a nice warm cage and heated slab to sleep on: the best we could provide at present was a sheltered spot behind a stand of gorse and the cold ambient temperature. Warily, Hiccup clambered off the dragons and rummaged in his saddle-bags, before unclipping one and slinging it across his body by the long strap. I brought mine as well because it did have some emergency supplies. Stormfly croaked in disappointment and scurried to the most sheltered spot as we faced the dark grey, slick wall.

"What next, boss?" I asked.

"Um…pretty sure I'm not in charge," he reminded me dryly. "They put Thuggory in charge of the
Team...with Snot field leader..."

"Dragon dung!" I snorted. "Well, you're in charge of this mission, Dragon Boy!"

"I think you have the higher rank..." he pointed out.

"Not with the dragons...or me, Commander Dragon Boy," I told him. Shaking his head but giving up on the discussion, he walked to the side door, then hunkered down and found a grille a couple of yards to the west. Swiftly, he fished a screwdriver out of the saddlebag and began to deftly open the grille. He peered into the echoey passage and I crouched by him. "Hmm...I see a problem there," I commented. He looked at me quizzically.

"Not lit?"

"Our helmets will provide light and coms," I reminded him. "No...that is too small for Toothless."

"Er, yeah," he admitted, running his hands through his soaked hair. I had sensibly kept my helmet on but I know he felt claustrophobic in his. "And...? Apart from not getting squashed by an irritable Night Fury?"

"No Toothless-no Alpha," I reminded him. "And Changewings on the loose?"

"They're too big for the ducts as well," he reassured me.

"And we can stay in the ducts the whole way?" I clarified.

"Um...probably not."

"Probably?"

"No." He leaned forward and looked into the darkness. "Maybe I should go alone..."

"No way, Mister I seem to completely attract trouble and chaos wherever I go!" I told him firmly. "If I let you out of my sight, you'll probably come back with NO legs..." And my tone softened as I caught his hand. "And I know your stump is playing up. It's a long way up to the Ninth Level. We're on what level here?"

"Sub-basement three," he murmured.

"So twelve floors. In ducts. By foot. On a dodgy stump. With wild dragons on the loose. Are you crazy?"

"Yes...but to be fair, I did mention that when I proposed..."

"And that's why I'm going with you," I told him firmly. "I'm fitter than you, I'm smaller than you and I will make sure my new fiancé doesn't get eaten by dragons!" He turned his head to me, soaked dark auburn hair plastered to his head and his eyes gleamed with pride.

"That's the girl I fell in love with," he said with a grin and ducked into the air duct. I watched him clip in his com earpiece and lift an LED torch, flicking it over the interior-smooth granite-and then he checked his wrist-com for the layout. Sighing, I flipped down the visor of my helmet, engaged image intensification and linked my com to his. I saw him fiddle with his com and the schematics appeared on my visor. I crawled in after him.

"You owe me a decent social appointment after this," I grumbled.
"I thought I was in the lead," he protested, walking forward at a half-crouch. The duct was about four feet high—very cramped for his tall shape and not that comfortable even for me.

"I'm giving you minus points for this," I told him.

"Hey! How-how is that fair?" he asked. "I took you for a fabulous sunset proposal on the top of Ben Nevis. Why am I losing points?"

"Because I can see this going horribly wrong, my Dragon Boy," I said in a worried tone. "It's just the two of us, isn't it?" He paused and nodded.

"Everyone else is trapped," he admitted. "So we need to be careful." My hand instinctively dropped to my hip and found nothing there. That idiot Mildew had insisted I hand back my Trank-gun so I was unarmed—though I knew there were points where Tranks were located in case of dragon escape. I was determined to get my hands on one as soon as we were within range, because this was like some bad exercise. In fact, I wondered if they had ever trained in the ducts? I paused and mentally slapped myself: of course the twins would have!

We trudged along quietly and I listened to his irregular steps, my mind spinning back to that freezing night in the alley by my apartment block. What would my life be if I hadn't let my compassion win, if I had left the weird drug addict where he fell...or run when I heard him? I shuddered: Hiccup could have died from his pneumonia and Toothless would be in the hands of Alvin, I would never have heard of BERK and would be finishing Finals, oblivious to all this...utterly magnificent life. And I wouldn't be engaged to most amazing, kind, brilliant, reckless, brave man ever: I sped up and found his hand. He paused and snapped his head back, his eyes worried.

"Is everything okay, milady?" he asked anxiously but I shook my head.

"I've just realised how lucky I was to meet you," I told him. He quirked a lopsided smile.

"And you only just recognised it?" he asked me. I smiled.

"Slow learner," I mumbled and he chuckled softly. "So...best man?" I asked him. He paused.

"Are you sure this is the best time to talk about it?" he asked me, his tone wary.

"Babe—how many other times are we going to be able to talk without the others earwigging?" I asked him.

"The others—what?" he asked, his tone puzzled.

"Listening in," I explained. "I mean we could always chat while in bed..." I saw his smile widen slightly.

"I really can think of better things to be doing," he teased me and gently kissed my hand.

"You, sir, are very naughty," I told him off lightly.

"Me? Absolute model of propriety," he murmured.

"Insatiable..."

"Well, to be fair, we've only been together for..."

"Hiccup...you're just perfect," I reminded him, "but I think we have better things to do in bed as
well…"

"Ah-hah!" he smirked.

"Best man!" I insisted. He paused and shuffled a little further through the duct.

"Snotlout, obviously," he said without missing a beat.

"No offence but-why?" I asked him, following.

"Well, he is my cousin, he's my closest male relative and he is showing signs of growing up," Hiccup replied, ticking the points off with his fingers.

"Babe, on your stag night, you know he'll strand you naked tied to a tree on the top of a mountain," I warned him.

"I don't think you get trees on the top of mountains," he pointed out. "Tree line doesn't extend that high…Maid of Honour?"

"Cami and Ruff," I told him equally easily. "I'd never hear the last of it if I chose one over the other."

"So you're going to be utterly wasted on your bachelorette party as well," he concluded.

"We call then Hen Nights and I am going to a nice restaurant," I said firmly.

"Followed by a male stripper," he sighed. "Of course, then you'll realise what you're missing and will dump me…" I grabbed his hand and pulled him close, managing to lock lips with him for a long and very sweet kiss.

"Babe-I've seen everything, literally," I reminded him gently, feeling his hand cup my chin. "And I love you and want you. And only you. My Dragon Boy."

"Milady," he murmured, resting his head against mine, before twining his fingers with mine and leading me further along the duct-until we found ourselves at the base of a wide vertical shaft. We both sighed in relief, straightened up and stretched-before we stared up into the darkness. A ladder was bolted to the smooth granite, vanishing up into the gloom and I heard Hiccup sigh.

"Babe-you ready for this?" I asked him. Watching him, I saw his shoulders slump but he gave a small nod.

"Not the best on ladders," he admitted warily, tapping his prosthetic against the stone floor. There was a metallic click and I glanced at the device, recalling he used one of his own design that looked like a paralympic sports 'blade' rather than something that resembled a normal foot. "Um… not great at all." I pulled him close and hugged him firmly, feeling his arms close protectively around me.

"Babe-I'll go first," I reassured him softly, feeling him nuzzle my hair. "I brought rope so…" His head snapped up.

"Astrid…no," he told me firmly. "If I slip, I'll drag you down as well and I can't do that."

"And I won't let you fall, my love," I told him equally firmly. "If we're roped together and clipped to the ladder, neither of us will fall." His arms tightened again.

"It's going to be a long climb," he sighed, allowing me to rope him up in a safety harness and fish a
couple of clips from my saddlebag. Of course, we had done mountaineering during my training weekends but I had never expected to go climbing inside a mountain. "I wish Toothless was here..." I looked at him.

"Me too," I admitted, reaching out and grasping the first rung. "Ready?"

"No," he admitted, "but let's start before I run away." I smiled and began my steady ascent.

Toothless was thoroughly irritated and miserable. He had barely got started on his flight when they had landed and though his rider had clearly said something to his mate that had made him very happy, they had soon headed back to the Base. And then they had left him out in the cold and the rain. Both the humans had been unhappy as they vanished into the little tunnel and Stormfly was as upset as Toothless at being abandoned in the cold and the rain. And the Night Fury could tell his human friend was in pain and afraid...

But there was something else...something that worried Toothless more than he could explain to Hiccup. The human was closer than a brother, the soul he had sensed when he had hatched and rejected every other person offered to him as a rider before the skinny shape had stumbled into the Hatching Pit and Toothless's life—and Toothless could sense his worries. And this scent, faint though it was, sent his hackles rising and reminded him of a not-too-long-ago episode where Hiccup had been frightened and hurt and separated from his mate. The scent was very faint but slowly growing a little stronger. Something was coming...something evil...

Toothless barked urgently to the Nadder and she gave a small caw in response. She bobbed her head, giving a worried cry. She hated her part of the plan but the Night Fury was certain and he gave a little coo. Finally acquiescing, she bobbed her head again and launched into the air, heading round the base. Taking a final sniff, Toothless turned to the high tunnel and folded his wings as tightly as he could, then squeezed in and began to drag himself through, after his human. Hiccup needed him...

We had done three floors when it was obvious that Hiccup was struggling badly. He was largely silent and while I determinedly started off, he very methodically climbed one step at a time, making sure both feet were secure on the rung before moving his good foot up to the next rung. His hands were locked tight on the metal and he was hauling himself up mostly by the arms. I paused from my speedier climb and peered down, seeing him limit the pressure and time he put his weight through his prosthetic. The light of my helmet lit his taut and ashen face and showed the horrible pain in his expression. Sweat was beaded over his skin and his eyes were dark.

"Hiccup? Babe?" I asked him as he hooked his arm around the rung and took a breather.

"I'm fine," he said wearily but I wasn't fooled. I scooted down a couple of rungs because I could hear the pain in his voice.

"Talk to me, my love," I said more gently. "You're in pain—is it your leg?" He lifted his colourless face and forced a tiny smile onto his face.

"Milady—it's always the leg," he managed tightly. "The stump's just a little sore..." Which meant he was in blinding agony. I scooted a couple of rungs down and he shook his head. "I'll be fine, Astrid," he insisted but I wasn't fooled. I knew when he was lying because he was an abysmal liar.
"We must be up to...first level?" I murmured as he nodded wearily. "If you can give me one more floor, babe, we'll be at Pen level...and then we can get out and go to a fire escape. Those are open aren't they?"

"Only within the base," he murmured. "Can't get out..."

"But we're getting in-and it may be easier to drag you up the remaining floors going up a staircase," I suggested. His green eyes flicked up.

"Can crawl..." he murmured. "Don't stress, Milady. I'll get there..."

"If needed, I'll drag you up myself," I promised and he gave a little snort.

"There's a threat," he said with a flash of humour and determinedly hopped up the next step, though his hiss of pain was audible. I flinched but turned back up, secured our lines and sped ahead, reaching the next level in a couple of minutes and accessing the hatch. But it remained stubbornly closed.

"Hiccup...we have a problem," I said as he slowly dragged himself up. Grimacing, he pulled himself up almost alongside me and I could hear his heavy breathing but he locked his arm around the rung and reached out, having to put all his weight through his prosthetic leg. He gasped but stretched out, flipping open a small panel and wrenching the lever within down. The hatch unlocked and I was able to push it open. Fiercely, I grabbed him and pulled him close, feeling him sweating with pain before shimmying through and, after checking the corridor was silent, hauling him after me.

We lay panting on the brushed steel floor, exhausted by the climb. My hand snaked out to grab his...and his skin felt hot. Alarmed, I rapidly scrambled closer and gently rested my hand across his sweaty forehead...to feel his skin scorching under my gentle touch. I scooched closer, wrapping an arm across his heaving shoulders.

"You've got a temperature," I murmured and he gave a small nod.

"Yeah, well you knew I was really hot..." he mumbled with a flash of spirit, as his words from all those months ago flew back.

"The accident wasn't pretty and I had a pretty bad infection following. And a couple since."

"Your stump's infected again?" I asked him and he gave a small nod.

"I'll be fine," he mumbled, lifting his head, his emerald eyes feverish. "We have more important things to deal with, Astrid. I promise I'll go to the infirmary after we've unlocked Loki and corralled the dragons again." I felt a surge of pride at him, at the stubbornness he had not to give in and complete this mission. With a determined grunt, he levered himself to his knees, closing his eyes briefly as a wave of vertigo washed over him and I pushed myself against him, feeling his arm gratefully wind around my shoulders.

"Take it easy, babe," I murmured. "I'm here." He blinked.

"We're close to Pen Seven," he told me gently, leaning forward to use his hands to get to his feet. I winced as he grimaced while staggering to his feet. "And I have no idea where Shimmer is. The cameras are all out..." I paused and sighed.

"I can use the infrared overlay in my visor to detect them," I offered and he nodded.
"That would be helpful," he murmured, "but if you see Shimmer, you need a weapon…"

"Ahead of you, babe," I told him, consulting my mental map. "There's a trank gun stowed up by Pen Five…" He lifted his head and gave me a small smile, his face ashen in the subdued emergency lighting.

"That's my Astrid," he murmured and I gave a little smile.

"Your Astrid?" I asked him playfully.

"Um…I thought getting engaged meant I could sort of see you as my fiancée…and maybe expect you not to be with anyone else, hence 'my' Astrid…" he said quietly but then got unnerved by my silence. "Or not, please don't shoot me…" he added hastily as I wrapped my arms around his neck, flipped my visor up and kissed him firmly. I felt him relax as and kiss me back.

"I am your Astrid…if you are my Hiccup," I told him gently, staring into his pale face, the cheeks flushed with fever. He managed a small smile.

"Oh, I'm yours, Milady," he assured me genuinely. "For as long as you want me and at least until the day I die…" I pressed my face against his chest and sighed.

"Okay, not the best choice of words under the current circumstances," I sighed as he tightened his arms around me. "Let's get the gun and then we can try to get to the Ninth level…" He squeezed me again, his head dipping closer to mine.

"We need friends," he murmured gently. "Our dragons are trapped outside…but you have two other dragons you are bonded to…and they are very protective…" I lifted my head, frowning. "The Speed Stingers!"

Immediately, I gave a warbling whistle that I had used every time I saw the little dragons. I repeated it, reluctantly pulling away from his warm embrace and facing down the corridor. I heard him limp a step closer as there was a small noise, a little rustle. Instantly tense, I felt my eyes narrow as I peered into the dim corridor. Something was moving and his hand tightened on my shoulder, ready to pull me back if there was a danger. But two identical shapes reaching just above my knees sped towards me, their red eyes eerily glowing in the dim light.

"Zippy! George!" I called and the Speed Stingers gave little chattering calls, pressing their snouts into my outstretched hands. I could hear Hiccup chuckling behind me and I fussed my little dinosaur-dragons, feeling them nudge and nuzzle my hands eagerly.

"Milady, you never cease to impress me," he chuckled. "For a newbie at Dragon Training, you have managed to do wonders with two dragons that Bork described as untrainable. I guess you imprinted them when they had just hatched and they accepted you as their pack leader." He smirked and his tone sounded vaguely triumphant. "That will probably annoy Throk no end…" He took another limping pace forward and they immediately went on alert…then calmed as they recognised Hiccup, who I had already shown to them as a friend. "But why Zippy and George?"

I glanced up. "Um…there was a children's programme I saw when I was younger…and they had two characters who were puppets and honestly they just popped into my head when I saw them…" His eyes were twinkling with amusement. "It could've been worse! I could have called one of them Bungle!"

"Oh Gods," Hiccup murmured. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"Y'know, I said exactly the same thing when I met you," I reminded him, also smiling.
"Yeah, well I'm real slow on the uptake sometimes," he replied, limping forward, peering into the gloom. "Anytime, Milady!"

"C'mon, boys," I said, straightening up and following him.

oOo

Stormfly smelled it as well as she swooped around the mountain, giving a loud cry to summon the remaining defenders that had remained in the dale. The Night Terrors really didn't like the cages or Pens and had escaped recapture-especially since the new commander who her rider didn't like hadn't sent Hiccup and Toothless or Stormfly and her Rider to fetch them.

The small black shapes rapidly coalesced through the gloomy, wet afternoon with the white leader landing by the blue and gold Nadder. Stormfly explained her worries and the Night Terrors chittered anxiously, then looked up at the Nadder. Taking another sniff—and the scent was definitely stronger—she arrowed up with the Terrors into the clouds shrouding the peak of the Base mountain to wait…

…and hope that her friend Toothless would protect her rider as well as his own…
In the dim reddish emergency lighting, the corridors by the open Pen doors were very spooky and every sense was on edge as we listened out for dragons. Zippy and George kept by our side, their little jerking head movements not that reassuring. I suspected their sense of hearing was better than ours and they could hear the wandering dragons, exploring the unfamiliar freedom of the base. Hiccup was limping badly, his jagged breathing concerning me but he gave me that small smile of his and soldiered on, emerald gaze sweeping the corridor. Finally, we reached the corner and the box containing the trank gun. But when I punched in the release code...nothing happened.

I wanted to scream but repeated the release code, hoping I had just got it wrong. When that didn't work, I did scream and slam my fist into the reinforced metal box, clenching my hands in frustration. I needed that gun! But Hiccup gently caught my arms, leaning close.

"Easy, Milady," he soothed me. "It's okay." Then he limped unsteadily to the box and carefully removed a screwdriver from the little pouch built into his suit along his right forearm. As I watched, taut with anxiety, he deftly unscrewed the panel, hot-wired it and pressed '*' four times. There was a clunk and the box swung open. He sketched a small bow. "I also do parties," he added, a small smug smile tilting his lips. I grabbed the gun, holster and extra clips and gave him a broad grin.

"I'll bear that in mind-though I hope you won't have to hot-wire anything at our wedding," I told him. He grinned.

"I wouldn't dare," he admitted and then stiffened as a shadowy shape emerged from the gloom, the puzzle of his pistol trained on us both.

"Drop the gun or I'll shoot!" a hard voice snapped and we both raised our hands.

"Um..friend, Thuggory," Hiccup suggested but the Lieutenant took a balanced step forward, the gun snapping to aim directly at Hiccup's heart. He stiffened and I focussed on the soldier, seeing his eyes fare with anger.

"I should have known you would be in league with them," he accused him in a cold voice. "Makes perfect sense-you work in IT and were friends with the traitor Dagur and..."

Hiccup stiffened and dropped his hands.

"No I fucking wasn't!" he shouted, his eyes glittering with fury.

"One more step and I drop you!" Thuggory snarled. Hiccup froze, his face locked in fury. I could tell he was dying to say more but he didn't know Lieutenant Thyssen and didn't trust him not to shoot. "You know, I think your father, General Haddock was absolutely right!" Thuggory snarled. "You are a disappointment and a traitor and..."

"Drop the gun, Lieutenant," I said in an equally angry voice. "We're members of BERK and you have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Shut up, Lieutenant!" he snarled back. "I am your commanding officer, if you hadn't forgotten..." That made my blood boil and I decided just to check that out.
"Really?" I asked him snappily. "Only in a Riding situation-and this really doesn't look that, does it? I am a Lieutenant in the RAMC so I need to know which of us actually has authority. Date of commission, now!" He glared at me. "I've been in BERK a damned sight longer than you and I know what's going on. You've been here five minutes and are trying to shoot the two people who kept this damned place running, weeded out the traitors and kept the dragons out of Alvin's and Drago's hands! DATE OF COMMISSION!"

"Three years ago, March," Thuggory admitted. I gave a small smile.

"Bad luck," I told him sharply. "I passed Sandhurst and was awarded my commission four years and seven months ago before I entered University. I have seniority and am assuming command as of now. Now lower the fucking gun, soldier!" He glared at me and I felt Hiccup shift…but finally Thuggory holstered his weapon and moved to stand at ease—though he looked pretty mad about it. Hiccup took a wary step back.

"Wow, I learned not to piss her off in like five minutes," he commented with a grimace as he put any pressure on his leg. He paled further.

"So what now, Ma'am?" Thuggory asked me in a cold voice.

"Dragon Boy? Suggestions?" I asked Hiccup and he took a deep breath.

"Two priorities," he reminded me. "One is to try to stop the dragons doing anything stupid and the second is to release the people and restore ventilation before we all suffocate. I need to get up to the primary servers on Level 9 and input the Odin Override to undo the Loki Protocol."

"Hang on a minute," Thuggory interrupted. "Loki Protocol? What the hell is that?" I glared at him, reminding him of protocol…though, of course, the team never bothered much with that—as he had already found to his immense irritation.

"Fishlegs commed us as we were out on an experiment authorised by Gobber," Hiccup told him tightly. "An external attack on our system let the dragons out—but this was interpreted by the system as a near-lethal attack on the base and Loki was activated. It seals all exits, ceases all communication with the outside world and entombs us. Don't ask me why my father wanted such a stupid fall-back but he did. I can activate the override as senior IT tech—but it will have to be directly input to the servers because everything else is out."

"External attack-by who?" Thuggory demanded. Hiccup shrugged.

"Drago or his allies, I would guess," he admitted. "I'll have the team forensically analyse the incursion once we're back up and running."

"The air is getting a bit stuffy," I added. "Not enough to be a problem…here." And I gestured to the high ceiling of the walkway. "But for the others trapped in smaller rooms, it may become an issue." Thuggory started.

"You mean everyone is trapped?" he asked. I nodded.

"I guess you were on the corridor when everything switched off?" Hiccup asked him.

"Everyone else had already been told to get into a secure location because the dragons were loose," the Lieutenant told us. He shrugged. "I was on sweep because I suspected those damned twins would be out. How they ever passed Basic is a mystery to me…"

"I agree," I admitted, "but they have a certain skill set that does prove useful on missions." He gave
me a cynical look. "We need to get Hiccup up to Level 9 before we get eaten by dragons."

"I thought the told me the dragons only eat fish," Thuggory argued, peering suspiciously at the Speed Stingers. Zippy and George chirped amongst themselves, looking for all the world as if they were discussing what he had said. I smiled.

"Usually—though Nadders do respond well to roast chicken," I admitted, recalling Stormfly's eagerness for the treat. "But we're more concerned about untrained and dangerous dragons. Predominantly the male Changewing that used to belong to Specialist Harrigan."

"The traitor who killed himself by refusing aid when he fell," Thuggory interrupted, earning a smidgeon of respect for doing his homework.

"The dragon is insane and hyperaggressive," I tried to explain. "It slaughtered four men who broke into its Pen when they were trying to get into BERK. Even Hiccup can't train it. And it will attack you without warning—that's why we're concerned—and why I needed this!" I showed him the gun before holstering it again.

"Lieutenant—keep completely still!" Hiccup said suddenly, his eyes locked on a shape behind the man. He froze and was about to turn but I glared at him.

"Keep. Still!" I repeated. He stared at me and for a second, his dark eyes widened in sudden fear.

"What?"

"There is a male Nadder just behind you," Hiccup said carefully, his green eyes flicking over the dragon. The dragon had been bonded to Savage and recovered when he had broken into BERK on his ill-fated and fatal mission…but he didn't look hostile. "He seems interested…"

Thuggery's eyes widened. "What? How?" I smothered my smile as Hiccup limped forward, his eyes downcast. Simultaneously, I backed away as my fiancé carefully took the gun from the Lieutenant's holster and tossed it aside. "What the Hell are you…?" he began but Hiccup grabbed his hand and glared into his face.

"Shut up and do as you're told!" he snapped. "Remember how I am the lead dragon trainer? Well, this is Dragon Training 101-bonding!"

"Bonding?"

_Oh, I was going to enjoy this!_ I backed away a little more, leaning against the wall of the Pen with Zippy and George chirping by my legs. Thuggory tried to pull his hand free but found—as I had before—that Hiccup had a very strong grip. He stared fiercely into the soldier's eyes.

"Yes. This Nadder is showing a strong interest in you—Gods alone know why!—so I am going to see how it develops," he said deliberately, feeling Thuggory try to pull away. "Calm your breathing. Dragon training is all about trust. Trust between Rider and Dragon. This Nadder sees something in you he likes and he is willing to give you a chance to bond with him. He was previously bonded with a man who betrayed BERK and who was killed by the insane Changewing, Shimmer. Yet he still wants a Rider."

"I…er…" It was the most discomposed I had ever seen Thuggory, a man who seemed not to lack any confidence in anything.

"So be calm. Do not show fear. Give your trust to the dragon because he is offering you the magical experience of his friendship. He will protect you, be your faithful companion, friend,
confidante and partner. All you need to do is show you trust him. So no weapons. Look away…and offer him your hand."

"Are you kidding?" Thuggery's voice was now verging in panic but Hiccup tightened his grip and glared into the shocked eyes. "He'll bite my hand off! I mean I read what happened to you…" Hiccup's eyes glinted in anger.

"That was not at bonding," he said tightly. "Toothless chose me over every other rider-and believe me, most of them were offered to him. And they tried to take him from me, shouted at me, jailed me, beat me to try to force me to give him up. And I never would because he is my soul-mate and I would give up my life before I surrendered him."

Thuggory stared and I listened too. I recalled his words as he languished in the cell awaiting his trial, accused of treason by his own father and broken by my words, by my angry and hasty assumption. When I forgot he loved me and needed me with all his heart…but even that could not make him abandon his beloved Toothless. I would always be a close second in his affections, but I knew as well why that was. And-and I was fine with it-because loving Hiccup meant loving everything he was, including his unshakeable bond to the Night Fury.

Thuggory lowered his head and extended a very reluctant hand towards the male Deadly Nadder, And waited, his shoulders rigid and hand hanging loose and ready by his empty holster. I saw him breathe slowly, imagining the worst, expecting the horrific pain of amputation…

…and feeling the warm scaly muzzle of the Nadder push into his empty palm. His eyes snapped open and his breath hitched at the sudden miraculous sensation. Hiccup's pale face warmed with a smile at the other man's astonished look; the amazed, shocked and wonder-filled smile. Then the Lieutenant swung his head round to look into the violent yellow eyes of the Nadder, so similar to my own beautiful Stormfly's gaze, and he smiled, his other hand automatically rising to caress the cheek.

"Hey, fella," he said in a shocked voice. "My-my name's Tim but all my friends call me Thuggory. And I-I guess you're my friend now as well? Because that would be really awesome, to be honest. And I know Lieutenant Hofferson's Nadder would make you feel real welcome in the Team, hmm?"

The Nadder gave a little caw and an almost-purr. I found myself relaxing even though I hadn't realised I was so tense-but then I hadn't ever witnessed a Rider bonding. I could still remember my bond with Stormfly and I found myself smiling a little nostalgic smile.

"You have to name him," Hiccup said softly. "He's been trained before so he will ride easily and will respond to commands…but you have to train him to you, to your body language, your tone of voice, your personal bond to him. And that includes your name. Because Savage called him Spines and I really don't think he was massively impressed…" The Nadder lifted his head and cawed irritably, his spines raised briefly. He was a handsome dark green with amber highlights and there was an imperious tilt to his head.

"Duskstrike," Thuggory murmured and the Nadder gave an approving caw. Hiccup straightened up and winced as he took a limping step forward.

"Well done," he said appreciatively. "Welcome to the Team, Dragon Rider!" He smiled and gave a small coo. The Nadder scurried forward and nudged the lanky auburn-haired dork and Hiccup petted him gently. "Duskstrike, eh? You like that? I think Toothless will approve of your new Rider as well." The Nadder nuzzled him again before turning back to his new Rider and Thuggory gave a shocked smile.
"What do I do now?" he asked, rubbing the scaly face. Hiccup sighed.

"I'd suggest staying with the dragon," he said wearily, taking another limping step. "Not all the dragons may be so friendly and he will protect you. If you see a red dragon, back away. Or a grey and purple one because that will electrocute you!"

"Hookfang and Fanghook may try to set you on fire," I added. "They think it's a game with their Riders." Thuggory cast me an irritated glare.

"Got that already," he told me in a long-suffering voice. "Be honest. Did they do anything you told them?" I made a show of thinking about the question though the answer was, of course, negative.

"Babe?" I prompted Hiccup and he rolled his eyes in response.

"Only with lots of shouting by my second-in-command and Toothless roaring to keep their dragons in line," he admitted. "Milady-we need to get up. The air is getting stuffy and Duskstrike really is too big for the stairwell."

"Head for Pen Three," I suggested. "The smaller dragons-and the hatchlings-are in there and there is another trank gun stashed by the main door. I would suggest grabbing a couple of cod and feeding your new dragon then petting him and sitting down with him to wait it out."

"There's a bigger stairwell at the far end-I could go up there…"

"And do what?" I asked him bluntly. "You really have no experience in dealing with dragons. Hiccup is lead trainer and I have gained a fair bit of practice. You are safer with your dragon, Rider-because now you are bonded, you are incredibly valuable. Go, feed your dragon and be safe until the lights come back on." He opened his mouth. "And that's an order!"

"But the rest of the Team are trapped…and the air is getting stale," he argued. "I need to try to free them!" I glanced at Hiccup.

"Hiccup will do that," I assured him, "but I can go to try to release them as well." I looked at my boyfriend and he nodded very slightly.

"We'll free them," he said. "I promise." Thuggory stared at us and nodded.

"Accepted," he said, his hand still resting on his new dragon. "Be safe, okay?" With a smile, I grabbed Hiccup's hand.

"We intend to be," I told him as we headed off towards the stairs.

oOo

"Well this sucks," Snotlout commented as the twins tried to pry the door of the canteen open with no success. The Riders had all headed for an early tea when they had heard the dragons were out and though Snotlout had managed a double helping of lasagne before the lights went out and the dim reddish emergency lighting had come on, the fact they were now trapped did little to improve his mood. In his mind, he had really been hoping that he could wrangle the dragons back in successfully and prove he was good for something. In his heart of hearts, he knew Hiccup and Astrid were both better trainers than he was and he did respect them but it might have stopped Thuggory and especially Throk being so damned smug.

"No kidding," Cami grumbled, cracking another can of cola. She had already polished off five and was distinctly twitchy: her upbringing as a traveller coming and going as she pleased really made
her hate being locked in.

"Can you hear that?" Eret asked, frowning and tilting his head. They all listened.

"Nope-can't hear anything!" Tuff said loudly. Everyone winced.

"That's right," Fishlegs added quietly. "Nothing."

"And that's important because…?" Gustav asked, munching another donut.

"No air conditioning," Cami realised, lifting her head up.

"No ventilation at all," Fishlegs sighed. Snotlout sat up straight and folded his arms and scowled.

"Okay, Fishface-spill," he demanded. "You're looking like a wet weekend!" The larger man huffed.

"Okay-you know how I got hold of Hiccup?" he asked. There was a pause and Cami and Ruff nodded. Tuff decided to charge the door with his head and knocked himself out. "The release of the dragons triggered an automatic protocol-Loki."

"And…?" Snotlout was looking thoroughly annoyed now.

"We're entombed in the mountain. All external contact severed. Ventilation and life support cut off. We're trapped and doomed!"

"WHAT?" Snotlout, Ruff, Cami and Eret all exclaimed. Fishlegs nodded mournfully.

"I guess Hiccup will try to help but I have no idea how he can even get in to save us…" he sighed.

"So we're trapped in here, with no life support?" Snotlout clarified.

"No air?" Gustav asked, clutching his throat and making choking noises.

"No coms or hope of rescue?" Eret asked.

"No more food?" Bucket added, his voice unhappy. Snotlout looked alarmed as well as Tuffnut abruptly sat up.

"No food?" he repeated and collapsed back in a faint. His twin sister rolled her eyes, unimpressed.

"Not forgetting the dragons on the loose in the base?" Ruff added.

"Basically, we're in trouble," Mulch commented in a depressed voice. The little round, older Rider shrugged and his larger, simpler brother, Bucket, patted him on the shoulder reassuringly.

"No worries, brother," he said happily. "Hiccup will rescue us." Forcing a smile onto his face, Mulch nodded.

"Of course. I'm not worried." But his face said otherwise. Cami rose brusquely.

"To Loki with this," she decided and clambered up onto the table. "Eret, Snot-can you get the grille off the ventilation shaft? I'll go through and open the door."

"And who'll rescue you from the wild dragons?" Fishlegs asked anxiously. Casting him a scornful glance, the fidgety blonde shook her head.

"Bog burglar? Like I need rescuing from a dragon?" she taunted him.
"You may if it's Shimmer!" Eret pointed out and everyone fell silent. Shaking herself, Cami gave a small shrug.

"We gotta get out," she pointed out and reluctantly, Eret and Snotlout pulled the grille off, boosting Cami up into the duct. Glaring at the rest of them, Ruff scrambled over the server, grabbed a large serving knife and then stamped up onto the table.

"Get me up, too!" she demanded. "I'm not letting her go alone!" Snotlout started.

"What?"

"Eret?" the female twin asked and he nodded, boosting her up and she slid into the duct after her friend. Gustav stared after them, his grey eyes watching them vanish. The others were too large to fit into the ventilation shaft—but he wasn’t. And something inside him recognised that letting their two female members go off wasn’t the best split of resources if they did run into a dragon.

"I'm going too," he announced and slammed a chair on the table, climbing on and following them into the duct. The others heard an outbreak of cursing.

"Who let mini-Snot into the damned duct?" Cami bellowed.

"Gerroff?" Ruff snapped. There was a thud.

"Ow! You kicked me!" Gustav protested. Face-palming, Snotlout squinted into the gloom.

"I don't suppose we can just put the grille back and quietly suffocate?" he asked.

"Where’s Butt-Elf?" Tuff suddenly asked, sitting up again.

"Gustav Larson, if you touch my leg again, I swear I will chop off your…"

"You let her in a duct? Without me?" Tuff asked angrily, glaring at Snotlout.

"Hey-no one lets your sister do anything!" Snotlout protested.

"Actually, we just get out of the way or get trampled!" Fishlegs added.

"You do know there are Terrors in the ducts?" Tuffnut snapped, scrambling to his feet. "And Loki knows what else now the cages are open! We have to…"

And then the door shuddered with a huge impact…and another… Everyone left in the dim, reddish canteen spun in shock and Snotlout picked up a chair, brandishing it like a lion-tamer. Eret grabbed another chair and Fishlegs frowned as the door shuddered twice more under heavy impacts—and then burst open. A large, solid shape erupted in and everyone stared in shock—but only one person spoke.

"MEATLUG!"

We managed to crawl our way up the stairwell to the fifth level, where the main habitations were. I was feeling tired but Hiccup was on his last legs—well, leg. He was colourless, his cheeks flushed and eyes too bright with pain and the fever and he was barely able to put any pressure on his left leg, hauling himself manfully up using his one leg and the hand rail. I tried to help but he shooed me forward, locked in his own personal world of pain—and it honestly tore my heart to see him in such distress. But he gave me that little brave smile and dragged himself to my side, leaning
heavily against the wall.

"Babe, are you okay?" I asked him, wrapping my arms around him and he briefly enfolded me in a fierce embrace, burying his head in my shoulder. I felt the shuddering breaths run though his scorching body, his lips brush my neck and then he reluctantly lifted his head.

"Milady, I'll cope," he said roughly, his eyes locking with mine. "I need you to release the others and get them into a safe place."

"Seminar One," I suggested and his face warmed with a slight smile.

"My favourite seminar room," he riposted lightly. "You'll need to get the General from her office and rescue Gobber as well…"

"And the medical staff-though they all have piped O2," I mused. "Okay-I'll get the General and the Riders. Do you want to take the boys?" I indicated to Zippy and George and the Speed Stingers looked up sharply but he shook his head wearily.

"They're bonded to you, Milady," he reminded me. "They love you." He gave a small, brave smile. "I-I have other resources…" I cocked an eyebrow at that-I couldn't help it.

"Holding out on me, Dragon Boy?" I enquired and he hugged me again.

"Cover your ears," he whispered and I did so as he cupped his hands round his mouth, took a deep breath and then ROARED, the sound bouncing up and down the stairwell and echoing into all the levels of the Base. He repeated the call once more and I stared at him in utter shock. Both the Speed Stingers had backed up and bowed their heads submissively.

"Was that…?" I asked, uncovering my ringing ears and his emerald eyes glittered in a triumphant smile.

"Night Fury roar," he confirmed proudly, breathing hard at the effort. "He's their Alpha, so the call may make them think…"

"But Toothless is outside," I reminded him. He caught my hand and pulled it to his lips, tenderly kissing it.

"There is another Night Fury here," he reminded me gently. "And I'm hoping she will come and protect me. I have to go, Astrid. People will start running out of air soon…and we need the sensors to track down the dragons. I need you to free the others because I am the only one who can unlock the Base." I flung myself against him, pressing an urgent kiss on his dry, hot lips before burying my face in his chest.

"Don't you go leaving me now, Dragon Boy," I whispered. "I've only just got you as officially mine." His arms tightened around me and he kissed the top of my head.

"I'm never leaving you, my love," he murmured. "Sooner we do this, the sooner you can show off that ring…um…if you still want to, that is." I gently pulled away.

"Me want," I told him softly and glanced back at him. "Take care, Hiccup. And if you need me, com me! I will come, no matter what else is happening." He smiled and then I dived through the door, checked the passage and whistled, the small dragons racing along at my side. I knew I ought to get the General first before I rescued the Riders…because I had faith they would find a way out themselves—at least temporarily before they got themselves into more trouble.
A roar and a yell had me accelerating towards the sounds, wondering who had gotten themselves trapped by a dragon now…

\[oOo\]

It was only as the door clicked shut that Hiccup allowed himself to sag, to almost collapse in agony. It had taken almost every ounce of courage to conceal the unbearable pain from his stump, to mask the horrific torment walking had become. But he didn't want to worry Astrid because the mission was all important-and because, no matter how much his father had told him he was a disappointment, Hiccup had always wanted to make his father proud. He was a Viking! And Vikings really didn't curl up, eyes burning with tears of agony just because their amputated legs were shooting white-hot blinding pain up the remains of their limbs.

Cold sweat trickled down his forehead, his bangs sticking in tendrils to his face as he lifted his pained gaze and forced himself upright. A wave of vertigo washed over him and gritted his teeth, then pushed himself up and grabbed the rail, hopping pathetically up the stairs. Biting his lip and tasting blood, he hauled himself on, knowing he would probably be crawling by the time he reached the Ninth level and the servers, four tall storeys above them. He hissed in pain as he made the sixth level and gave a groan. There had been one other reason why he had been desperate to encourage Astrid to leave him:

Dragons sought high places.

And the Ninth floor was as high as it got and accessible from the top of the high gallery by Pens Two and Nine. If the Changewing was lurking by the servers, Hiccup wanted his beloved Astrid as far away as possible. And though he really desperately wanted Toothless, he was just hoping Myrkr would come in response to his call because he guessed he would need someone to protect him.

If he ever made it up to the top floor.

Bracing his shaking arms, he dragged himself on, rehearsing the access codes for the Odin Override, the most complex and important reset in the Base. Ozzie and he had the authority to invoke the Override-along with his father-and of them, only Hiccup was left. There hadn't been time to give General Zakhysnyk authorisation and the full lowdown on the override-and Gobber had, of course, refused. Hiccup was their only hope.

Finally, head spinning and breath scorching in his chest, he crawled to the door at the very top of the stairwell and used it to pull himself to his feet, whining in pain as he staggered to the door and carefully opened it.

The Server Room was a wide space with the massive bulk of the multiple servers lined up, deep shadows from the red emergency lighting making the place sinister and threatening. Hiccup took a worried breath, his hands shaking and he shivered. He knew his temperature was climbing and he felt light-headed and sick. But his hazy gaze saw the screens on the access console were on standby, run by the integral emergency power supply meaning there was still a chance to reverse the lockdown. Lifting his chin and drawing on every ounce of strength he still owned, he limped unevenly a few paces into the room…

…and then he froze as he heard the hiss of a Changewing…
Pray To Thor

Sixty: Pray to Thor

Stormfly peered down through the thin wisps of cloud. The rain had died down as the pitch black night had enfolded the mountain and she had roosted with the Night Terrors clustered around her. They had taken station, as asked, over the main garage entrance, invisible high above the rocks.

The stench was almost overwhelming.

The lights trundled up the road, the growl of powerful engines loud in the muffled darkness of the damp night. The whiff of diesel couldn't overpower the scents she had been detecting for hours. With a screech of brakes, the vehicles stopped and the enemy emerged.

Stormfly leaned forward and gave a tiny chirp. Smidvarg chittered back and the Night Terrors began to flutter in response. It was time…

I raced down the corridor towards the roar of the dragon feeling it was horribly familiar. A sudden moment of clarity struck me: why was I running towards the roar of some mythical monster that I suspected was insane, untrainable and very, very dangerous when a sensible person would be running in the opposite direction? But I was a soldier, a Hofferson and a Dragon Rider so I accelerated towards the roar…and the cry.

As I rounded the corner, I saw two things I really didn't want to see: Dagur's Skrill and Colonel Throk. Skidding to a halt, I ducked down and slammed against the wall as the dragon roared again, electricity crackling along its wings. The lack of power running through the Base seemed to be dampening down the creature's offensive abilities somewhat…but it still came armed with a mouthful of serrated teeth and talons and it was advancing steadily towards the officer.

"Back away towards me," I said evenly. Throk paused and glared at me.

"Lieutenant-what…" he began.

"Back away and get behind me!" I repeated through gritted teeth. "That dragon-the Skrill-fires electricity and my suit is insulated." Throk paused then obeyed as I stepped forward, my gloved hand extended towards the Skrill. It roared at me and I backed up a half-step.

"Can't you just train it?" he asked shortly.

"Had you familiarised yourself with the situation in the base, sir, you would be aware that there are two dragons you avoid at all costs!" I told him sharply. "Donald Harrigan's Changewing, which has gone insane since his death and the Skrill, which only responded to Dagur."

"Who is dead," Throk said coldly.

"Shot in the head by Hiccup when the traitor tried to kill me," I confirmed, watching the large dragon advance on us. "Keep backing up, sir." And then my little protectors raced between me and the Skrill, chittering angrily, their blood-red eyes slitted as they hissed. The Skrill roared but they were undeterred, racing forward, their stinger tails slashing at the dragon's legs as they raced by. I watched the big dragon slash at them in its rage but they were simply far too speedy, racing by and slashing at its legs again. I grabbed the Colonel's arm and pulled him further back, to the corner of
Suddenly, electricity coiled around the Skrill and arched across the corridor, flicking along the steel-plated floor. I snatched Throk's hand from the wall a millisecond before he could be electrocuted and shoved him further back, snatching the trank gun from its holster.

"Shoot it!" he shouted at me.

"The darts don't get through its electric field-they burn up," I told him tightly, keeping the weapon aimed at it. "I would have to use the whole clip and one may get through-and that wouldn't drop that thing!" The Speed Stingers both raced through twice more, stinging the Skrill's left back leg over and over until the leg crumpled under it. But one got too close and a wing swatted the much smaller dragon hard against the wall. I gasped as George hit with a crack and slumped limply to the floor. Furious, I fired a handful of times that had it backing up-but the darts exploded before they impacted and I caught Throk's frown as he realised what I was talking about-and that I knew more than he did about this Hastily, I darted forward and grabbed the fallen dragon, slinging him over my shoulder like a snoozing toddler before dashing back and shoving the Colonel back. Zippy stood between us and the advancing Skrill, roaring furiously and hissing, his tail flicking and poised to strike.

"What now?" Throk asked me, a definite taunt in the tone. Honestly, did this asshole never give up in trying to prove he was right? He could have done as he was told and backed off but no.....he had to hang around and get in my way...and on my nerves. I backed up steadily, my gun still levelled at the electricity-swathed monster, the pinkish flashes illuminating the corridor unevenly.

"Well, you run for it-preferably to try to free the General from her office-while I cover your retreat!" I said tightly, never taking my eyes off the growling Skrill. "Anytime this week, Colonel!" I was touching on Hiccup-level of sarcasm now and almost cringed inwardly but the man did back away...

…and then a roar echoed down the corridor, reverberating in the small bones of my inner ear. I winced as a sleek black shape galloped up, barged Throk aside (he satisfyingly ended on his ass) and landed between the Skrill and me. The red prosthetic tail whipped just past my face as the Night Fury arched his back.

"TOOTHLESS! How on earth did you get here?" I asked in shock. The dragon half-turned his head and cocked an eye in an expression which very clearly said 'Really?' I gaped as he briefly pressed his wings very tight to his body then turned away, tenting them over his arched back once more.

"Okay, you came through the duct that we didn't think you would fit through."

"How the…?" Throk began but I holstered the trank gun.

"C'mon, Zippy!" I said clearly. "We need to free the General. Toothless is going to take it from here-and we don't need to be in his way."

"Lieutenant?"

"Sir-Toothless and the Skrill REALLY don't get on!" I explained, turning away. I could feel George breathing against my neck and I was glad he was alive, though I knew I needed to get him to the Veterinary Techs soon. "They are going to fight-and you don't want to get in the way of those two battling it out!" Without pausing, I marched past him in the direction of the Base Commander's Office-just as electricity arched around and Toothless leapt at the Skrill with a roar.

oOo
Hiccup froze for an instant-then flung himself behind the nearest server, calming his breathing and
closing his eyes to try to listen for the dragon. He knew he was buried in a deep shadow, he knew
the dragon couldn't see in the dark and it had to breathe as much as he did: he was really hoping
that he could track the dragon by sound. A wave of pain washed over him and he gritted his teeth
against a groan that thickened his throat and crashed another wave of nausea over him. It was the
far side of the room, by the larger door they had used for access when installing and maintaining
all the equipment. The console was about six feet to his left. Gritting his teeth and knowing there
was no way he could scramble there, he slowly began to crawl under cover to get to the keyboard.

The dragon shifted but he inched closer, his eyes narrowed. The damned thing could camouflage
well and the dim red lighting made the red Changewing much harder to pick it out. Spine prickling
with fear, Hiccup ducked behind the console and sneaked a peek. He had been to see the desolate
Shimmer several times since Dogsbreath died and the dragon had been unremittingly hostile-and
even resistant to Toothless's Alpha mode. With a sinking heart, Hiccup had realised that the dragon
bore both him and Toothless great animus, blaming them both for the death of his beloved Rider.
To Shimmer, it must have seemed that they escorted Dogsbreath down to his death without trying
to help him…and there was no way to ever explain the truth to the creature.

The Changewing wanted to kill Hiccup.

Hunkering down under the console, he managed to crane his neck enough to see the screen and
quietly pulled the keyboard down onto his lap to allow him to access the console…but as he typed,
nothing happened. Rolling his eyes and fighting against the thumping headache, he ducked down
quietly and fished the LED light from his satchel, peering at the dusty cables and finally pushing
one harder into the socket. He randomly tapped a key and the cursor moved, leaving an 'h' on the
grimy screen.

There was a leathery creak and a hiss as the Changewing inched closer. Hiccup pressed his body
curled under the console, the keyboard hugged to his chest and face turned away, not wanting to
see the dragon. He heard a hiss and saw the metal floor-plates bubbling under the dripping acid
from the dragon as it searched for the intruder. Anxiously, the young Rider slid his real foot further
under the cover, desperately trying to protect himself from the wickedly caustic fluid.

Then the door slammed open and a grey shape barrelled forward, a roar filling the air and wings
flapping awkwardly as the young Night Fury landed on the desk, her eyes narrowed and throat
filled with purple plasma. The Changewing recoiled a pace, its violent yellow eyes slashed by
slitted pupils and acid drooling from its mouth. His growled but Myrkr fired three small plasma
bolts that drove it back. Desperately, Hiccup began typing, accessing the system and peering up,
checking his access was accepted as he navigated the system and began the complex process in
activating the Odin Override…including recalling the 27 digit confirmation code…

Glancing up at the little grey shape of the Night Fury, Hiccup's fingers danced across the keyboard
and hoped she could hold Shimmer back long enough…

OoO

Once they had persuaded Fishlegs to stop hugging Meatlug, the Riders collected provisions and
prepared to go out dragon hunting. They knew they were best placed to capture the escaped
dragons though Tuffnut had insisted on looking for his sister first: but, to everyone's concern, the
ducts had been empty.

"RUFFNUT!"

The word echoed up and down the ventilation shafts and through the canteen. Snotlout frowned:
the male twin never used his sister's full name and there was an unfamiliar look of concern on his face. Without even thinking, he patted the twin on the shoulder.

"She'll be fine," he said reassuringly. "You and she know those ducts better than anyone-and she has Cami with her. Those two can handle themselves!"

"And even Gustav can't mess it up for them," Eret added in a calm voice, finding a flashlight behind the servery.

"Though you recall when we asked him to go and feed the dragons and he managed to set the fish freezer on fire?" Mulch pointed out.

"Or when he got us all covered in cow dung during the manoeuvres last summer?" Bucket added.

"Not helping, guys," Snotlout growled through his teeth, once again struck by how much like his cousin he was sounding. He shuddered: much as he actually liked and trusted Hiccup, Snotlout Jorgensen was a much cooler dude than the auburn-haired dork! "Though he did manage to get us all on dragon dung duty for a month when he set the General's pants on fire…"

"Okay, he's an honorary Nut," Tuff sighed. "Let's go find our dragons and my sister!" But Fishlegs was frowning as Meatlug nudged him and whined.

"Guys, I think something has upset Meatlug," he announced, crouching down and gently caressing his dragon's face. The dragon fidgeted and then spat something into his hand.

It was a piece of grey-green BERK uniform fatigues. And a chewed and unrecognisable ID card.

Snotlout stared at it and groaned. "Puh-leese!" he groaned. "Not another damned member of BERK playing for the other team!"

"What other team?" Eret asked. "There seem to be lots of other teams!"

"Good girl!" Fishlegs said gently and happily patted the Gronkle's head. Meatlug abruptly turned and waddled out into the corridor. "What is it? Daddy's here!" he murmured and got up. Snotlout rolled his eyes.

"Maybe she's taking us to the others?" he suggested. "C'mon-anything's better than hanging around here!" And he trotted off after the dragon.

\[oOo\]

Myrkr was holding the Changewing back-just-but Hiccup felt a sense of rising panic that almost overwhelmed his headache, nausea and the unbearable pain in his leg. The red dragon was skittish and angry as he navigated the system, put his clearance in.

**ACTIVATE ODIN OVERRIDE?**

Glancing up, he slapped the ENTER key. The screen changed to a 3x3 grid of boxes. Hiccup knew the 27 digit code would be randomly allocated to the boxes according to an insanely complex algorithm…but he still had to enter it in the correct order. Breathing hard, he blinked against the fuzziness in his head and wiped the sweat from his brow. He closed his eyes for a second, visualised Astrid's face to remind him of why he was doing this…and began to type.

\[HhH 3HD K02 /29 ;)\]
Myrkr spat another small plasma bolt at the Changewing and it roared. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, Hiccup finished entering the code and slapped ENTER.

**ACCESS DENIED. ERROR CODE 139: INCORRECT CODE ENTRY. YOU HAVE 2 ATTEMPTS REMAINING.**

*Thor, you have got to be kidding me,* Hiccup thought fuzzily, blinking hard. His head was spinning miserably and he bit down on his lip against a moan of pain but went back to the start and began again. "Just another minute," he muttered.

**HhH 3HD K02 /29 ;-)**

Suddenly Myrkr gave a screech as a huge gout of the brilliant green steaming acid splashed forward and hit her full in the face. Hiccup glanced up and screamed, hauling himself up and seeing the little dragon fire another four plasma blasts wildly that slammed the Changewing back. As she spun around, whimpering, he was already moving, his hands swiping the acid off her muzzle, scraping it away fearlessly and scrabbling in his bag, pulling out the water and swishing it onto her left eye which had been caught by the acid attack.

"Easy, girl, easy," he said hoarsely, ignoring the vicious burning in his hands. Desperately, he wiped them on his legs, hoping the reinforced material of his flight suit would hold and then he sloshed the remaining water onto the wounds—but he could already see the skin bubbling and burning under the assault. Grimacing, he collapsed to his knees and crawled to the keyboard. He clumsily tapped in the last six characters and slapped enter.

**ACCESS DENIED. ERROR CODE 139: INCORRECT CODE ENTRY. YOU HAVE 1 ATTEMPTS REMAINING.**

Sagging, his hands loosely clenched, Hiccup began to type one last time, very carefully and painstakingly due to his damaged hands. The Changewing was roaring and Hiccup pressed on…and then he heard the dragon advance again. This time he finished his entry, muttered a small prayer to Odin…and pressed ENTER.

There was an aeons long pause as Shimmer advanced, his huffing breaths loud and even. Myrkr growled.

**ACCESS GRANTED. ODIN OVERRIDE ENGAGED IN 5…4…3…2…1…**

The screen went blank but nothing happened. The ventilation remained silent, the emergency lighting continued to wash the room with a blood-red cast and the screen remained black. Hiccup stared and gave a hopeless groan, clutching his hands to his chest. And then he saw it—a small metal box by the door to the stairwell.

A trank gun.

And by the box was a fire extinguisher. Gritting his teeth, feeling the room jolt and blinking against the greying of his vision, Hiccup threw himself forward into an ungainly scrabble, having to use his burnt hands and agonising left leg to make it to the wall. He shimmied up to grab the extinguisher and swung it round to slam into the locked box. It took four blows but it burst open and he threw the extinguisher to the floor and grabbed the gun then slapped the clip into place.

"Okay, Shimmer…take it easy," he murmured hoarsely, sweating at the effort of keeping his burnt hands clamped around the weapon. The dragon gave a loud roar and lurched forward, acid dripping from its maw. Myrkr leapt between the sagging Rider and the furious Changewing, plasma bolts
peppering the dragon-but as the Changewing drew itself up to attack. Hiccup threw himself forward, dragging the small Night Fury aside, the red burns on her muzzle and the whitened corner of her left eye tearing at his heart with guilt. The acid flew and though he bore Myrkr aside, the acid hit the back of his left leg.

His scream echoed round the room and he collapsed forward, the hot acid eating through his prosthetic, which shattered, and the back of his left leg. As his leg collapsed, he hit the floor with a slam, shivering with pain but swinging his shaking left hand up and levelling the gun at the roaring Changewing. Without a word, he emptied the clip into the dragon, the sounds of the zipping shots filling the room. There was a final growl from Shimmer…before the dragon collapsed to the floor with a thud that shook the room.

Myrkr stared at the fallen dragon and saw Hiccup slump onto his face, his head curling forward and gun dropping from his raw hands as he curled them to his chest. She gave a small worried croon as he coiled up, his sobbing breaths loud in the sudden silence. The dragon whimpered and gently licked the acid burn. Hiccup screamed, coiling up tighter.

"I'm sorry," he groaned. "I'm sorry, Myrkr. I let you get burnt. And-and Astrid, Milady…oh, I'm so sorry…" He gave a small sigh. "I failed."

I sprinted down the corridor, hearing the roars and growls of combat between the two dragons behind me. Throk was running after me as I sprinted to the door of the General's office and punched in the override that Hiccup had told me on the way up: as expected it didn't work. Throk was about to make some fatuous comment when I prised the cover off the door control and hot-wired it how he had told me. There was a clunk and the door opened-to reveal the irritated shape of General Zakhysnyk.

I stared at her and she glared back.

"What the Hell is going on?" she demanded, her cool green gaze sweeping over Throk and I. The Colonel opened his mouth to answer.

"Hiccup and I were out on a flight. Someone let the dragons out and the base security interpreted this as an attack which activated a protective Protocol called Loki which cut the base off from all external contact. Hiccup, of course, left a back door so we re-entered through the negative pressure air vent, came in through the Pen level and now Hiccup is at the servers on Level 9, inputting the override."

Throk glared at me as I got in first, standing deliberately at ease, though I had George still slung over my shoulder. The General looked to her second in command and XO and he scowled.

"That appears to be an accurate summary of what happened," he reluctantly admitted as the General swung her cold gaze to me, her eyes flicking over my shape and realising I was dressed for flying.

"And what were you and Specialist Haddock doing out of the base?" she demanded. I gave a small smile.

"Authorised flight by Gobber," I reported. "Night Furies and Nadders need lots of exercise so they need to fly outside. Toothless and Stormfly had a fast flight but we headed back when Fishlegs called us."
"So your dragons are trapped outside?" the General asked, her eyes lingering on the dragon over my shoulder and the other fidgeting by my legs.

"Actually, Toothless followed us and is in the hall, fighting the Skrill," I reported. Her eyes widened. "Oh, he'll win," I added with more confidence that I felt, knowing that Toothless had lost half his tail in fighting the Skrill-and the dragon had been responsible for taking Hiccup's leg. "Stormy is in the Glen…"

"And if anyone were to walk past…?" Throk sneered. I gave him a scornful look.

"There are no paths and no access into the Glen, we are miles from anywhere, off all roads and paths and it's pitch black out there," I pointed out. "Who precisely will see her? A wandering owl? A particularly adventurous vole maybe?" The General's look silenced me.

"I would appreciate you respecting the chain of command, Lieutenant," she said coldly.

"Yes, Ma'am," I acknowledged, "though it was the stupidest thing he's said today."

Then the lights came back on and my face lit with relief. Unbidden, I commed my fiancé.


"I thought he was the lead dragon trainer?" Throk sneered tauntingly.

"And even he can't train every single dragon!" I snapped back. "Look-the lights are back on-which means he's made it to Level 9 and rebooted the system-but he's not responding." I stared at the General. "I need to get to him. TOOTHLESS!"

A roar answered and the Night Fury galloped round the corner, a growl sounding in his throat as he saw Colonel Throk. There was another roar behind him and Toothless arched his back, whipping round to face the Skrill and abruptly, a bluish-purple glow lit his eyes, mouth, nostrils, and the rounded spines running all the way along his back and tail. He gave a shattering roar and the Skrill gave a final roar…then lowered his head and backed away, sitting down and submitting. I shot it four times with my trank gun and watched it slump to the floor then climbed into Toothless's saddle, laying George across the saddle.

"Can you get it into containment, please?" I asked. "The Skrill is really difficult to control and it needs the specialised environment set up in its Pen." The General looked at me and then nodded.

"Once you have retrieved Specialist Haddock, I wish to talk with you both about this crisis," she said sternly and I felt my heart sink.

"Yes, Ma'am," I said and she waved me on. Leaning low over the saddle, I rested a hand on Toothless's head. "Find Hiccup, bud. I think he really needs you." Casting me a worried look, he tensed and then galloped off down the corridor, heading for the stairs…and Hiccup. But as we rounded the corner, I felt George croon and as he fidgeted, my com crackled.

"A-Astrid?"

My eyes widened and Toothless screeched to a halt. It was Hiccup.

"Dragon Boy?" I murmured over the line. There was a pause and a pained intake of breath.

"Milady…I-I need you to do something for me," he said roughly and I felt that sense of foreboding
wash over me. I knew he was sick and he sounded awful-in pain and as if he was struggling just to speak.

"Babe—you sound terrible!" I said and Toothless gave a concerned warble.

"Is that—Toothless?" he gasped and a small warble sounded from his end.

"And you've got Myrkr?" I guessed. Toothless yipped and Myrkr replied, almost as if the dragons were having a conversation. "Toothless came through the tunnel. Babe—I need to get to you. You sound…hurt."

"I'm fine," he said.

Liar, liar...he was a hopeless liar and my anxiety rose another notch. He was hurt. God, what had happened?

"Hiccup—we both know that's not true, my love," I murmured. "Tell me or I will come up and see for myself." There was a shuddering breath.

"I'll be fine for the moment," he said hoarsely. "Astrid—I need you to do as I ask. I promise—I promise I won't die while you do this but it's important." Okay, now I was freaking out.

"Hiccup—why might you die?" I asked him in a breathless voice as Toothless began to jog towards the stairwell. Intelligent and sensitive to his Rider's voice, Toothless had picked up on the wrongness in his tone as well. "You're panicking me and Toothless! I'm coming up!"

"No!" His voice was hoarse, pained—but firm as he could manage. He was stubborn and brave—both things I loved about him—but right now, I was really concerned. "Astrid...Shimmer was here. He's—he's tranked and harmless for now—but he got Myrkr. I think she's going to be okay."

"He's got you too, hasn't he?" I realised. There was a pause.

"I can see everything from up here," he said roughly. "And we have bigger problems. The Grimborns are at our gates—and they're coming through. They're coming for our dragons."
Hookfang and Fanghook were hanging around with Barf'n'Belch on the main level just outside Gobber's office when the Riders trundled after Meatlug. Snotlout gaped at his dragon.

"Hookie!" he exclaimed and raced forward to embrace the Monstrous Nightmare—but the dragon head-butted him though he gave a purr. "Stupid dragon," the sergeant muttered affectionately. Tuff greeted the Zippleback and Eret calmed the younger purple Monstrous Nightmare, who was looking for Gustav, but all three dragons were agitating to get into the Main Garage. Fishlegs frowned and stared at them. Meatlug was also bumping worriedly against the heavily armoured doors, rumbling unhappily.

"Get…Gobber…" Hiccup's voice rasped from their coms and Snotlout instantly stared at the others.

"Cuz? You okay?" he asked in a concerned voice. There was a pause.

"Doors…should be open now…" Hiccup rasped, his voice hoarse. Eret sprinted to the door-to find Gobber singing 'I'm a Viking Through and Through." He waved at the Corporal.

"Good tae see ye, laddie!" he grinned, waving his hip flask.

"Very merry but less coherent even than usual," was his verdict.

"Gobber's pretty drunk!" Snotlout explained over his com and there was a pause. "Not sure where everyone else is. We've got our dragons…well, some of them…and…"

"You need to seal the garage," Hiccup said hoarsely. "The Grimborns have forced their way in-and with the security protocols all overridden, leaving us open- the whole place is in chaos. You have to stop them entering the main base-by any means."

"But how?" Snotlout protested. "We've got no weapons and just three dragons…" There was a pause.

"Kind of thought complete destruction and disaster was your speciality," Hiccup rasped over the com. "Come on, Snot. You're a soldier-and the leader of the Riders. Can you manage that, just this once?" There was a pause and Snotlout's face lifted with a small smile.

"Tuff, Eret, Fish…you wanna help me blow shit up?" he asked and the male twin gave the broadest grin.

"Dude-you have no idea how happy I am to hear that," he sighed. "Hold on here-the armoury is just round the corner." Eret cast the sergeant a jaundiced look.

"And you may just have given him license to reduce BERK to rubble," he warned but Snotlout was unrepentant.

"Look-it's survived everything we, Dagur, Savage, Dog, Vorg and Alvin have done to it so far-I'm sure we won't destroy it by allowing Tuff free rein…" he said confidently. There was a pause as Gobber limped up.
"I'll hold ye ter that!" he said with a belch and promptly fell over.

oOo

"Well this was a brilliant move!" Ruff's accusing tone was loud in the small office as the three Riders struggled against their bonds. Plastic ties had been effectively employed to tie their ankles together and their hands behind their backs as they sat on the floor in a line by the tied up and gagged shape of Colonel Mildew, who was glaring and probably cursing through his gag.

"It was a perfectly good plan until you decided to follow me and the duct gave way," Cami retorted. "Thor, my Mother and clan would be completely ashamed I couldn't even get through a bunch of ducts…"

"Don't blame me-it was mini-Snot who was nudging my heels and then he slipped…and suddenly we were all zooming downhill…" Ruff protested. The youngest Rider shrugged.

"Sorry…never crawled around ducts before," he admitted as the two blondes stared at him in shock.

"Really?" Ruff asked, astonished. "What the Thor have you been doing with your time?" Gustav huffed.

"Let me see-training with Fanghook, buffing up my guns, practising talking to the ladies…"

"You've been learning chat-up lines from Snotlout?" Cami scoffed. "He's so bad, he's almost woman repellant! He's been slapped more times than he's been kissed!"

"Hey-he said he had experience!" Gustav protested as Cami and Ruff tried not to snigger.

"Gustav-Hiccup has more 'experience' than Snotlout," Cami said kindly. "Lots more."

"Not this ain't fascinating but are you just going to sit there and gossip or are yer going to try to escape?" The snide, whining voice of Colonel Mildew grated through their generally relaxed mood and the girls glared at him.

"Hey-this is your office-so how come you got yourself captured in your own office?" Cami demanded.

"I'll 'ave yer for insubordination!" the Security Chief complained as Cami shuffled her wrists down until she was able to writhe and gradually move them down, around her legs and finally in front of her body. Grinning, she leaned forward and began rubbing the plastic on the strut bracing the legs of the office chair.

"Cool," Gustav commented and fell over trying to mirror the action while Ruff—with some groaning and cursing—managed to repeat the same feat. The female twin bounced to her feet and bounced round to the computer console, peering at the screen. The intruder had been frighteningly efficient, his deeply tanned skin covered by a mask over his lower face, his cold brown eyes sweeping over his prisoners dismissively as he had captured them and accessed the open console.

"He's downloading the data about our dragons and personnel," she reported.

"Here! That's classified!" Mildew grumbled.

"You know—I don't think he was listening," Gustav commented, writhing and struggling with his hands. He had managed to slide down and was now lying on his back like an upturned turtle. Ruff
sat down in the seat and tapped the keys. Then she nudged her wrist com with her nose until the channel opened.

"Hiccup? Are you there?" she hissed. There was a pause.

"Ruff?"

"No offence—you sound like shit," she said bluntly. "I heard the door locks open. Was that you?"

"Yeah," he said wearily. "Atmosphere should be recycling again now. Are you okay? And the others?"

"Um yes…and no," she admitted. "More no, to be honest…"

"What's happened?" he asked in a concerned tone—though he sounded exhausted.

"Some guy has broken in—he's in Mildew's…sorry, the security-office and is accessing the dragonpedia and personnel files. No idea what he's after…"

"Maybe those things?" Hiccup suggested. "Cut the power and cut him off. I'll isolate the console…" Cami swung her legs out and ripped the cables from the back of the hard drive.

"Hey—I was working and I hadn't saved me work!" Mildew protested.

"How was he able to access your computer?" Cami snapped, sawing at the wrist restraints. They were definitely fraying. "You idiot—you left it unlocked and so he could waltz in here as soon as the power came back on and penetrate the system." She looked around and saw the flash drive and nodded to Ruff…but as the female twin grabbed for it, the masked man was back, snatching it from the console and grabbing Ruff by the hair.

"I'll take that," he growled as she swiped out at him. "And maybe a hostage will be helpful…" But as he began to haul her away, Cami lunged at him, her hands shoving him back and dragging Ruff away. And then a knife flashed and the girls went down. Gustav kicked out at the man and as he went down, he kicked out again, earning himself a kick back before the door was slammed and they were locked in.

"Oh…that's just perfect," Mildew sneered. "Now we're locked in again…"

"Damn, damn, damn," Cami cursed, a hand pressed to her side. "Ruff—you okay?" The twin nodded, biting her lip against the amount of blood oozing from the wound. "There's a small knife in my boot. Get it out and use it to cut yourself and the others free—and then call Major Gothi."

"Can't yer cut us free…" Mildew moaned.

"She'd bleed out," Ruff growled as she fumbled and found the little blade. It was surprisingly sharp and it easily sawed through the plastic—but she didn't even take the time to savour her freedom before cutting her legs free and then turning to freeing Gustav. She glanced up at the youngest rider. "Go after him—and keep Hiccup updated," she ordered. "I'll stay with her…" Cami gave a wan smile.

"Sisters together," she smiled as Ruff turned to Mildew and began to free him.

"Yeah—two sisters—and one old woman," she muttered.
I arrived at the doors of the main hanger as Snotlout seemed on the brink of launching a full scale assault on a small country. Tuff was laden down with ammunition belts and grenades while Eret was packing two machine guns. The sergeant had six guns on various gunbelts, an AK-47 in his arms and a large 'Rambo' knife sticking out of his belt. The dragons were bouncing up and down in excitement though Fishlegs was hanging back next to Meatlug with a trank gun in his hand. I leapt down from Toothless and Zippy followed me, chittering eagerly. George was fidgeting urgently and when I put him down on the floor, he limped a bit but joined his brother and chittered excitedly, ready for action.

"Okay-what's going on here?" I demanded, staring at them, recalling Snotlout's reluctance to take a gun when we went to face the threat in Birmingham…but this was different. There were invaders in our base and we were definitely on the back foot-hence enough arms for a battalion! Snotlout looked up-and there was definite relief in his blue eyes.

"Is my cousin OK?" he asked bluntly. "Coz he sounded completely fucked up." I nodded.

"He's ill, his leg is playing up and he's faced down Shimmer," I explained. "Idiot has got himself injured-he won't tell me how badly-but he wants us to repel the invaders before we go and fetch him." Snotlout looked cynical. "Myrkr is keeping an eye on him." That got him scowling, reminding him that Hiccup not only had the Alpha Night Fury but also another Night Fury. "What's the plan?"

"The usual-we defend BERK and drive out the invaders," Snotlout said but I frowned. There was something wrong. Surely they had to realise that we would be ready and we would detect their incursion as soon as the doors opened? These were the Grimborns, people who planned and manipulated and did everything to capture dragons… I glanced down at Zippy and George.

"You know they're dragon trappers?" I checked. "They will be after our dragons. So if you steam in there, mob-handed, I guess they'll say 'thank you very much' and drive off heavier two Nightmares, one Zippleback and one Meatlug!" They guys predictably all scowled.

"Well, what do you suggest, Lieutenant?" Eret asked pointedly and I sighed.

"We have to do some of the mindless combat," I admitted with a small smile, "but catching the enemy in a crossfire will also work well…" The Corporal winked.

"Like the side door-so I can sort out anyone at the front gates?" he suggested and then his eyes widened. "Gustav?" We all spun-to see the youngest Rider panting up.

"Intruder..." he gasped, his arm waving back along the corridor. Snotlout nodded.

"Yeah-we're just about to attack and drive them back," he told his protege but Gustav shook his head, still breathing hard.

"No. In Mildew's Office! Ruff and Cami were there as well…a man hacked Mildew's console until we kicked the cables out! He snatched his flash drive and stabbed Cami before he ran this way..."

"He hasn't come past," Tuff said in an astonishingly serious voice. "Is my sister okay?" There was a gravity in his tone that he rarely used but Gustav nodded.

"She's looking after Cami," he said. "Can I have a gun? If he hasn't come past...where is he?"

"More importantly-what did he want?" I mused. "Was that all this was for? Misdirection to hack our system?" Fishlegs looked very worried.
"What would be so important they would go to such lengths just to get into our system?" he murmured, looking into my eyes. "The systems are encrypted and very complex: how would they know what to go after?"

"Unless they already knew from the previous times he hacked the system for Drago?" I suggested, lifting the com to my mouth. "Hofferson to Will."

"Good to hear you, Lieutenant," the cheerful reply came. "I guess Hiccup unlocked the Odin Override?"

"Yeah—he's still up with the servers," I admitted. "But in the aftermath, there's been a direct hack from within the Base. Can you see what was accessed from the Security Chief's Office? Hiccup says he's isolating the terminus but he has other things on his mind…” There was a hum from the other end of the line.

"On it," Will promised as a roar sounded from within the garage. I looked at Snotlout and nodded.

"Lead on, Sergeant," I invited him. There was a pause.

"Um…you are senior," he reminded me.


"Thuggory?" he probed.

"Pen level with his newly-bonded Nadder," I explained and then Snotlout gave a nasty grin.

"Oh, I wanna see him trying to ride a dragon," he said in a tone that promised huge amounts of teasing… "But first…let's throw these bastards out of our Base!" He opened his com. "Ready, Eret?"

"On your mark!" the Corporal said. Snotlout grinned, handing me a loaded Luger. I checked it professionally.

"Okay—on three…THREE!" he yelled and surged through the door, diving sideways and snapping off a volley of shots at the Hunters. Gustav and Tuff arrived, yelling but I hung back, checking the layout, then Toothless surged forward, coughing a plasma blast at the door and blowing three armed Hunters aside. I paused, snapping off a shot and then peering up-to see nets and trank guns set up over the entrances. I wrenched the Night Fury sideways and a net missed us by inches before he snapped round, his head swinging up and accurately taking out the net launcher and the tranquilliser guns that had been bolted to the walls. Gustav shot a Hunter but the man fired at him and he ducked, throwing up his arm to futilely protect him…

…but another roar echoed—not a draconic roar but a human imitation. My head snapped round and I stared at a slim shape with raven hair in a braid over the left shoulder and cold green eyes. Heather. And then it all fell into place: how they knew about the protocols, how they knew where to get access…

She wants Windshear!

I saw the familiar shapes of Viggo and Ryker and snapped off a couple of shots at them as I felt the Night Fury growl. The Hunters were targeting the dragons as they surged into the space, trying to
chase the invaders out. I tranked a couple who lunged at Meatlug and was treated to the astonishing sight of Fishlegs completely losing his cool, roaring and throwing the men around like rag dolls. I hadn't really appreciated just how strong that husky rider actually was and it was completely disorientating to see his normally placid face twisted in anger.

"You keep away from my Meatlug!" he shouted, punching another man out. Tuff was racing around like a madman, narrowly avoiding being shot and trailed by Barf'n'Belch, who leapt in and shielded him more than once. It was also impressive the way he could direct Ruff's head using hand signals before yelling at his own to blow up the expelled greenish gas to explode something-or preferably several someones. Toothless shot away a few more traps they had laid in the garage, blasting net and bola launchers apart and freeing Blanche, who had managed to get herself trapped. The Hunters had driven their vehicles inside and were trying to round up the attacking dragons… but found the Speed Stingers more than a handful.

Ryker was heading for me and Toothless growled, firing at him. But he dodged and flung himself at me-to meet my foot to his middle. I leapt away from Toothless, parrying the lunge he made at me with the Luger before Zippy sped at him. And then the little dragon yelped piteously as Ryker kicked him viciously, slamming his small body sideways, a leg twisted.

"Those little lizards aren't going to get me again," he growled cruelly but I glared at him.

"You know there are two of them?" I asked as George slashed his leg twice. Ryker roared and his leg almost buckled as his left arm hung paralysed as well. Toothess spun round and swatted him back with his tail as Viggo glared-and then his eyes drifted beyond me. A man in a ripped base uniform stumbled past, his tanned face half-covered with a mask, a scar visible down one side of his visible face and his dark eyes very cruel. There was a slash across his chest, blood on his face and he was staggering drunkenly. And I was even more shocked to see Gobber stumble after him, his hook waving wildly and a small grin tugged my lips. The man-clearly the intruder Gustav had mentioned since I had never seen him before-had thought to access the Operations Office and had grossly underestimated the drunken two-limbed Colonel.

"And stay out, yer feckin' yak-loving dragon-trapping son of a sheep's backside!" Gobber yelled, stumbling after him. Snotlout unleashed a burst of machine-gun fire at the fleeing man and Viggo cast us a cool look before he turned away.

Outside, one of their vehicles exploded in a welter of fire, melting under sustained white-hot flames. Heather turned and gave a Razorwhip roar-and behind me, came the answer. Windshear burst through the door, heading for her Rider-but I levelled my gun at the traitor.

"Toothless-hold her!" I commanded and he gave a powerful roar, a faint blue glow lighting the row of blunt spines running down his back. The Razorwhip instantly stilled, her toxic green eyes helpless, swinging to look longingly at her Rider-but she obeyed the Alpha. I stared grimly into Heather's eyes. "She stays."

"She's MINE!" Heather growled, oblivious to the fights diminishing around her. And I could sympathise, I really could-because I knew Stormfly was mine…and I couldn't forget how heartbroken Hiccup had been when his father denied him access to Toothless. And though technically, all the dragons belonged to BERK, in our hearts, we Riders belonged to them and they, us.

"I can't let you have her," I said tonelessly, suppressing my sympathy. "She's a powerful dragon and Drago and the Grimborns will misuse her-and you!"

"I can make my own decisions!" she sneered.
"Heather—you were drugged and your brain chemistry irrevocably altered by the drug Alvin gave you," I said, never moving the muzzle of my gun from over her heart. "This isn't you…"

"By the use of the word 'irrevocably', Astrid, it means it is now!" she sneered. "I want my dragon!"

"Then surrender and stay here with her!" I offered, my eyes fixed on her face. There was a pause and then she laughed in my face.

"Are you kidding?" she sneered. "You were all willing to leave me to die!"

"Hiccup wasn't," I retorted. "He risked his liberty and his life to get you help!"

"Ah, Hiccup, Hiccup, Hiccup—is he really that naïve?" she scoffed and I gritted my teeth at the cruel tone. I hadn't been happy that he had been so stupid in his choices, joining the horrible Grimborns to make sure I got away and Heather got help…but for her to scorn him when he had risked so much for her was offensive.

"He's decent and honourable, if that's what you mean," I growled. She shook her head.

"How is dear Hiccup?" she asked in a sarcastic voice. "Any problems…with his leg?" I stiffened, for there was an inflection in her voice that had my hackles up.

"What do you know about his leg?" I snapped, trying to keep the anger from my voice.

"Is it hurting?" she asked in honeyed tones. "Because I know Viggo's present should have kicked in by now…"

Present?

"Heather—he got treatment that should save your life…" I tried but her face closed in hatred. Outside, gunfire chattered and explosions sounded.

"He owed me that and more!" she spat. "He killed my brothers!"

"Spitelout killed Ozzie!" I protested.

"And Hiccup murdered Dagur himself!" she spat as I groaned inwardly. Hiccup had done it to save me but he had killed Dagur.

"He had more reason than anyone on this planet to kill Dagur," I ground out. "And he was a rabid dog. He deserved death!"

"And so does Hiccup," Heather snapped. "Guess what—it's coming for him. He took away my family—and now I'm taking everything from him!"

"I won't let you," I promised and she smirked.

"Then I'll have to take everything from you too," she threatened as another explosion sounded and a familiar shape swooped through the open garage doors. Stormfly flapped up, her spines slicing down to drive Heather back from me. "Starting with…her!" she snapped and drew a gun, shooting Stormfly three times. There was a desperate squawk and she crashed to the ground, blood welling from the wounds in her side. And because I knew dragons were generally pretty bulletproof, I knew the rounds had to be armour-piercing.

"STORMFLY! NO!" The cry was weak—I knew it as the words burst from my mouth—but I saw her cruel smile as she swung the gun around to target Toothless. I had lowered my gun in shock but
rage exploded in my chest. Hiccup had risked his life to save her because he had promised Ozzie—but I knew he wouldn't hesitate to kill her to save Toothless—and I wouldn't either.

"And him," she added. My finger tightened on the trigger…but suddenly the gun fell from her nerveless hand as George raced by, his sting slashing her wrist open. She screamed a curse and I fired at her. She dived away, speeding towards the door, shots ricocheting off the armoured doors—as the Night Terrors streamed through, claws ripping at her face and head. She yelled in pain and rage, hair wild and blood pouring from a dozen wounds across her face as she ducked outside. Snotlout and Tuff were yelling and driving out the last few intruders while Smidvarg had the Night Terrors in the shape of a giant Nadder, hissing and slashing—which was enough to have the remaining trappers running for it. I scooped up the limp Zippy on my way to my beautiful girl, my eyes burning with tears.

Stormfly was lying on her side, her head lifted weakly as her acid-yellow eyes with wide, frightened pupils, locked on my face. "Oh girl…I'm so sorry…" I whispered, resting Zippy down and caressing her frightened face. "Hey-it's okay. I know you were protecting me from Heather. You were waiting to come in, weren't you—and you looked after Smidvarg and the Gang…which was so brave. And I heard the explosions, hmm? Was that you?" She gave a weak chirrup and I scratched her face, tears in my eyes. "My brave, fierce Stormfly. We'll get you fixed up…"

The chatter of machine-gun fire sounded again and Eret burst through the door, his eyes wide in shock.

"Heather…" he mouthed but Snotlout nodded, gesturing for him to help Tuff and Fish close the doors and secure the entrance.

"Sorry, man-she seems to be playing with the other team," the sergeant said sympathetically, putting his weight behind the heavy metal door and pushing it closed. "She shot Stormfly and tried to kill Toothless as well." Eret stared at him—and then his dark eyes swept over to see me, on my knees by my beautiful girl. He turned to help Snotlout and Tuff close the doors and lower the blast shields while Fishlegs scuttled closer with Meatlug. Toothless was nuzzling his friend and licking her wounds urgently: I resisted the urge to push him away because I knew Hiccup had shown Night Fury saliva had some pretty special healing properties—but the fact the wounds were still oozing blood had me scared for her. Fishlegs leaned in and pressed his hand against the wound in her neck, flicking his com on.

"Vet Emergency, Garage," he said urgently. "The Nadder X-26, Stormfly, has been shot by some form of armour-piercing weapon. Neck and flank wounds. I need the Vet Emergency Team now!"

"On our way…" came the reply as he looked up and smiled, his eyes reassuring.

"Meatlug will help," he promised. "Look-she's in pain and very afraid…but the Vets are really good." He looked into my face. "You need to go and see Hiccup. No offence—but we all heard him—and he sounded half-dead. The base is secure…" I nodded and then looked over to Eret.

"Corporal-can you help Tuff collect Ruff and Cami from the Security office and get them to the infirmary?" I asked. "Gustav muttered something about Cami being hurt." He nodded, looking grateful for the distraction and headed off with Tuffnut, still laden down by grenades, running alongside.

"And me?" Snotlout asked, a wry smile on his face. Despite everything, he looked pretty pleased with himself—because he had done well. He had personally taken out a large number of Hunters and made sure the Base was secure.
"You're in charge," I reminded him with a smile, hugging Stormfly once more before clambering on Toothless and motioning George to stay with Zippy. "You get to report to Throk and the General while I go looking for my boyfriend…" His chest puffed up with pride and he nodded.

"I may need your help with the report," he said in a whining voice but I turned away with a smile. If I wasn't good enough to lead them, Snot would just have to man up and wrestle with the paperwork-though Gods only knew what it would read like…or if it would be completed in crayon or not…

"Dream on," I reminded him and Toothless took off, heading for the stairwell. It was a long way up to the Level Nine Servers but the Night Fury was pretty much the fastest dragon on the ground as well as in the air. I hung on tight as he roared, the sound bouncing up and down the stairwell. It was meant as a challenge to Shimmer, if the dragon was getting any ideas about waking…but also a reassurance to Myrkr and Hiccup that we were on our way. I grimaced as the sound echoed back down and we whipped round another corner. I was starting to get dizzy so I stared upwards at the rapidly diminishing distance to the roof of the stairwell. We passed the red '8' of the penultimate level and then we faced the door-the same door Hiccup must have crawled up to on his heroic quest to release us from the Loki Protocol. Toothless growled and head-butted the door open.

Inside, the room was a mess, with banks of servers and some of the surfaces half-melted by fluorescent green Changewing acid. The little shape of Myrkr bounded up, a pinkish burn obvious on her snout and I caressed her gently, her big green eyes wide and concerned. And then I stared beyond…to see the person I was desperate to find, slumped in the chair.

He looked a mess and my anxieties came back tenfold. I slid from Toothless and surged forward, my steps causing him to look up. The light from the console made him look almost colourless, his eyes incredibly dark with pain. His face lifted in a relieved smile as he half-turned to me.

"Milady," he sighed, his voice hoarse with pain. I saw him lift his hands…and I winced, for the skin was reddened and peeling from the acid. His left leg was burnt as well, the prosthetic shattered by the acid but I surged forward and grasped his face in my hands, kissing him thoroughly before wrapping my arms around him and holding him tight. He was scorching hot with fever and I could smell the dehydration on his breath. Gently, I stroked sweat-soaked tendrils of auburn hair from his furrowed brow.

"You idiot," I murmured as his hand ghosted over my cheek, his emerald gaze drinking in the sight of my face.

"Your idiot," he promised. "I…did what I needed…"

"They're defeated…but Stormfly was shot by Heather and…" His eyes widened.

"Heather?" he rasped and he swallowed. I sighed.

"Sorry, babe-but she's definitely on the other team," I told him grimly. He closed his eyes.

"I tried to save her…but I may have just given Drago someone who can destroy us," he murmured. "She had an idea about the security protocols. She must have told them…" My fingers slid over his cheek.

"Not your fault, Hiccup," I reminded him softly, knowing his propensity to blame himself. "Look-what idiot makes a protocol to entomb you all anyway? It was an obvious weakness. And this was carefully planned, babe. They were after something specific. Now let's get you to the Infirmary because I know you're not well and that leg is a problem…" Damn him, he managed a wan smile.
"Wow—it took you this long to notice?" he teased me.

"Did I really agree to marry all that sass?" I replied, my lips curling in a smile as I was butted-hard-by Toothless who had clearly decided we'd had more than enough time to be reunited. He crooned and I moved aside as he thrust his head against Hiccup's lean shape. And I felt a familiar surge of warmth as Hiccup, no matter how awful he clearly felt, sat upright and wrapped his arms around the blunt head.

"Bud—I'm so glad you're here," he said happily, hugging the dragon. Toothless warbled anxiously and Hiccup closed his eyes. "Yeah—a bit battered. But you came through that duct? Boy, you really are determined, aren't you?" Toothless licked him and he smiled. "I think next time I try anything romantic, it will be in Pen One. So when something goes horribly wrong, I'll be safely in a Pen, hmm?"

A hiss interrupted the reunion and we all turned, the two Night Furies growling as Shimmer began to get to his feet, his ferocious yellow eyes locked on the vulnerable shape of Hiccup. His trank gun was out of reach on the console but mine was in my hand as I raised it and emptied the cartridge into the dragon, leaping back as the acid splatted onto the table. With a mournful wail, the Changewing collapsed as I raised the com to my lips.

"General Zakhysnyk—this is Lieutenant Hofferson. Hiccup has been located. The escaped Changewing is in the Level Nine server rooms and tranquillised. We need an urgent containment crew here before it wakes. Garage is secured with minimal casualties though my Nadder, Stormfly, has been badly injured." Hiccup’s eyes widened and his hand ghosted my arm. "I am taking Hiccup down to the Infirmary—the Night Furies will be with me. Over."

"Understood, Proceed!" was the clipped response and I looked into his worried emerald eyes. I rose.

"C'mon, babe—let's get you to the Infirmary so I can have my fiancé there when I show off my ring," I assured him. He grinned faintly and allowed himself to be hauled to his foot, leaning hard against me as I tried to manhandle him into the saddle. His head dipped and his hands tightened slightly on my shoulders.

"That's…my…'strid…" he mumbled and collapsed unconscious. I stared in shock as Toothless roared in alarm and I dropped to my knees by his sprawled shape. Under my expert fingers, I could feel a pulse so fast that it was almost impossible to discern each beat. His lips were turning blue as he lay limp before me…and as I forced myself to check him over as if he was a normal patient, I realised that Hiccup Haddock, my lover and fiancé, wasn't breathing…
We crashed through the doors of the Infirmary, Toothless's roar alerting everyone. I was administering artificial respiration every five seconds to the limp body in my arms while we had raced down the stairs at stupid speed. There were tears on my face as I looked up into the shocked faces of my colleagues.

"He's in respiratory arrest!" I managed to choke out as hands snatched him from me and hauled him onto a trolley. I saw Gothi kick her step into place and surge forward, her hands checking his pulse before she began bag-valve-mask ventilation. I stared at him, seeing her expertly tilt his head back and watching her tube him. The team were putting lines in and they were muttering about his burns-but I hung back. I couldn't treat him like a patient because he wasn't just a patient: he was my heart, my soul mate. I turned to Toothless and touched his head.

"Come on, boy," I managed. "We're in the way. You can sit in reception with Myrkr while I see what's happening, okay?" He grumbled but followed me, curling up in the waiting area with the little Night Fury at his side. Then I turned back to see Gothi and as the rest of the team stabilised Hiccup, I beckoned her closer.

"Major—he's been unwell and was feverish and tachycardic earlier," I reported. "He has been having problems with his stump and from what Heather said, I guess they at least put a tracker in there. Maybe it's infected…but Heather mentioned a-a 'present'. Maybe he's been poisoned?" She stared into my eyes and nodded, then turned to the team, ordering toxicology as well as a full septic screen. And then they prepped him to go into the scanner, with Ragnar leading the team. Gothi pulled me along to another patient-Cami, who was anaesthetised for suturing and exploration of her stab wound. She gestured for me to scrub in and after a moment, I agreed. Cami was a friend but this was something that was less personal and I was able to clear my mind and help her tie off the arteries, confirm there was no underlying visceral damage and then we sutured her up. Gothi let me finish and nodded approvingly.

We had just finished dressing the wound when Ragnar commed us that the scan was complete and he needed Gothi's input in interpreting the images…so I tagged along, desperate to know what was happening. What we found horrified us.

Viggo had implanted three trackers in Hiccup's stump and two in his neck…but one of the trackers had an attached capsule that had leaked something into his system. And there was also evidence of acute infection, a collection in the area and possible early osteomyelitis in his residual fibula. Basically, he was critically ill, in septic shock, possibly poisoned and needed urgent ICU care. So he was put on maximal support, given the most powerful drugs we could and prepped for surgery with our partner surgeons being flown in from the nearest trauma centre. They thought we were a specialist top secret army base—so when they came, it meant an urgent scramble to get the dragons all back into containment, since the incoming surgical team couldn't see them—not even the worried Toothless.

As my boyfriend was prepped, I managed to steal a moment to visit him, taking his bandaged hand and kissing his forehead, gently stroking the hair off his face.

"You stay with me, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third," I murmured softly. "You are my fiancé and I am marrying you. So you fight this and come back to me, my love. Because I will be waiting for you. I love you. Don't leave me. Please." And I kissed him again, before pulling back. I
was already logged as his next of kin and I nodded to the team as he was wheeled through to the operating theatre…before I walked back to check on Cami. She was awake and tired, though philosophical.

"I guess I'm getting a scar?" she asked me, once I had explained what had happened and I sat heavily in the chair.

"Apparently, it's only fun if you get a scar out of it," I reminded her and she managed a small smile.

"Hey, at least I'll look like I've been in battle now," she grinned…as the twins came in. "Ast-you okay?" I blinked and shook my head. In truth, I wanted to be anywhere but here—because one of my best friends, my dragon and my boyfriend had all been hurt.

"Stormfly was shot and is with the vets—and Hiccup's in surgery," I said tonelessly. "At least you're okay…" She looked up with sympathy—before the twins noisily greeted her and in the chaos, I slipped out. There was nothing else I could do so I headed down for the Night Furies' pen with Toothless and Myrkr, settling them in, feeding them and petting them thoroughly before going and settling by my sick and sedated dragon. Stormfly was alive so I ought to be grateful but as I curled against the glass, my hand splayed against the barrier, the ring gleaming on my finger, I felt anything but.

"Stay with me," I whispered.

oOo

I was woken by the Vet Techs, because I had dropped asleep against the observation wall of Stormfly's cage. With the busy night we had just finished, I guessed I had dropped off sometime around four and my clock read seven so I was still exhausted and stiff as well. Instantly, my eyes snapped open and I stared at my dragon, seeing her breathing peacefully. Clambering to my feet, I asked and was let into the cage and reassured myself by petting her. And she responded, still weak and in pain but her wounds had been treated, the bullets removed and damage sewn up. I gave her a little chicken which she ate and she was responding normally to me, though she was still injured and wouldn't be flying any time soon.

Heading back to the Infirmary, I was admitted straight away and headed for Hiccup's bedside…and then I stopped and found my eyes filled with tears—because he looked awful. There were lines and drips all over him, drugs supporting his blood pressure and fluids running in; he was ventilated still and he remained unconscious. I looked at his numbers and saw that his blood pressure was barely adequate, his urine output was inadequate and he was requiring a lot of ventilation. His temperature was still high, his bloods were deranged and he remained critically ill. Then Major Gothi came in…

"We've decompressed and debrided," she reported in her eerie mechanical voice. "There was an abscess and several foreign bodies crudely implanted in the stump…including one that was designed to release a noxious substance. You were correct: he was poisoned."

"With what?" I asked, feeling anger rise in my throat.

"Unknown."

"Alvin used substances from the Book of Dragons—I suspect Drago and Viggo would as well. If it's Viggo, it may well be a dragon poison. Several of them have venom," I reported to her. She nodded.
"The poison is certainly virulent—but the fact that he has a critical infection seems to have slowed the onset of the venom and saved his life," she noted pensively.

"He's in septic shock," I nodded. "Stubborn ass wouldn't get his leg looked at when it started hurting…" And she managed a small smile.

"I have noted that his pride sometimes seems larger than his brain," she commented. "We're keeping him ventilated—but we need the antidote as soon as possible."

"Find the venom and we'll find the antidote," I promised and went to curl up by my boyfriend.

oOo

I was woken by a gentle shake on the shoulder and looked up—into the face of Colonel Throk, mere inches from me. I started and pulled back, my hand still resting gently on Hiccup's arm. Yawning, I blinked and straightened up.

"Morning, Colonel," I managed roughly and then my eyes flicked to the shape behind him. "General," I added. General Zakhysnyk took a step closer and peered at the motionless shape on the bed.

"How is he?" she asked clearly.

"Critically ill, poisoned and septic," I reported. "Major Gothi and her team are trying to find the poison and then they will require assistance to locate whatever is required to reverse the poison…"
She nodded.

"What were you doing out against orders?" she asked and I sighed.

"Exercising the dragons, Ma'am," I replied shortly. "Authorised by Gobber because quite frankly, none of you people have a clue how to properly exercise the dragons. Any military organisation involving animals has experts looking after the livestock and listens to them…but instead, you chose people who aren't the best so the dragons are under-exercised, antsy and irritable. I mean, at least Thuggery now has a dragon but he's the most junior rider and he will need a proper trainer—do NOT say Snotlout—to learn what he needs to know." Throk scowled but I didn't care because someone needed to say this to the idiot and I was tired enough to lose my natural discretion in the presence of senior officers. "Mildew is a disgrace—and you really ought to ask him just what he was doing leaving his computer logged on when the intruder was hacking our systems instead of doing what we did—pull the cables out a kill the console. And he's supposed to be in charge of security?"
My tone was sarcastic, worthy of Hiccup himself and my hand gently brushed his arm. General Zakhysnyk frowned.

"There are a lot of questions to be answered about the incident—though it appears we are only able to ask them thanks to you and Specialist Haddock," she admitted unwillingly. "You could have stayed outside but you knew what would happen…"

"Hiccup knew," I corrected her, my tone emotionless. "He was clearly unwell but he insisted we climbed into the Base and that he went on alone up to the servers to unlock the protocol. And we knew that the insane Changewing was on the loose—and it hates Hiccup. Someone had to trigger the protocol: it was clearly a deliberate act. And the fact that Hiccup was tagged seven ways from Sunday tells me who and why." The General raised an eyebrow. "They were waiting for him to be out of the way because he could have disabled their plan before we could ever get locked down if he was here. This was orchestrated by the Grimborns—who led the attack with Heather. But the man behind this was Drago Bludvist."

"Exercising the dragons, Ma'am," I replied shortly. "Authorised by Gobber because quite frankly, none of you people have a clue how to properly exercise the dragons. Any military organisation involving animals has experts looking after the livestock and listens to them…but instead, you chose people who aren't the best so the dragons are under-exercised, antsy and irritable. I mean, at least Thuggery now has a dragon but he's the most junior rider and he will need a proper trainer—do NOT say Snotlout—to learn what he needs to know." Throk scowled but I didn't care because someone needed to say this to the idiot and I was tired enough to lose my natural discretion in the presence of senior officers. "Mildew is a disgrace—and you really ought to ask him just what he was doing leaving his computer logged on when the intruder was hacking our systems instead of doing what we did—pull the cables out a kill the console. And he's supposed to be in charge of security?"
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"And how do you reach that conclusion?" Throk challenged me and I smiled, crossing my arms.

"Because Heather has defected to work for Drago," I told them bluntly. "She was the reason he went with the Grimborns in the first place-to obtain the antidote to the drug she was given to control her. Her medical report regrettably shows permanent changes in her brain chemistry and synaptic webs that are a result of the mind-altering drugs. These were killing her and the antidote he derived from the intelligence from Alvin Tindall's computers has stabilised her condition-but she can never be restored."

"What were they after?" Throk asked thoughtfully and I shrugged.

"Hiccup's IT team will be investigating but I am afraid I have no idea," I told him tartly. "I'm only a medical officer, not part of Riders line command any more so you would have to ask Thuggory if he knows. All I care about is Hiccup-because he saved us all despite his injuries. My eyes were candid as I stared into his face. "He did what you could not. And Toothless came after him, despite barely fitting through the tunnel. That's the bond you don't understand: both would give his life for the other without hesitation and I would definitely give my life for Hiccup." The General looked at me, her eyes narrowing at my sarcasm.

"I will ignore your insubordination because you are plainly exhausted, Lieutenant-and because your conduct in the emergency was exemplary," she said coolly. "And because…your words have the uncomfortable merit of some accuracy…" She stared at me appraisingly and then nodded. "You are relieved of duty for rest and to spend time with your fiancé, Lieutenant. Even the most myopic Commander can see you two are extremely close-and I am certain that, if you are here, you will be able to tender any necessary assistance to Major Gothi." I nodded: she had my number in that respect. There were still casualties who needed care and I wouldn't let my team down.

"Thank you, Ma'am," I said and smiled, unselfconsciously turning back to Hiccup and gently stroking locks of his tousled auburn hair off his ashen face. "Hey, babe," I murmured and my heart clenched at his total lack of response. "I'm going to get a quick shower and then I'll be back. Will and his team are looking for the cure-and so is Gothi. Don't worry. We'll have you back on your feet in no time." And I kissed his forehead tenderly. "Stay with me, babe. You are not getting out of the wedding just by dying of sepsis and venom! Love you." The last two words felt so right I managed a faint smile despite my exhaustion and fear for him and kissed him again, before I turned away and walked past the officers, feeling their eyes trail after me. Forcing myself to be the officer I had been trained to be, I lifted my chin and continued my brisk walk without looking back.

No matter what, Hiccup wasn't going to die-I would move heaven and earth to prevent that and tear my way through Drago's base, if necessary, to save his life. We would save him-and then we would find out just what was so important they would cripple the base and launch a full scale attack...just as a diversion...

 oOo

"You got it?" Drago Bludvist's cold voice growled loudly in his pristine office in his base near Akureyri. Heather sat back in her seat and sipped her espresso, her face slashed and cut by the claws of the Night Terrors. Lounging against the far wall of the office, the dark shape of Krogan, his scarred face and soulless eyes half-shadowed, nodded.

"We were interrupted before we extracted all possible data but we got in excess of ninety percent," he said calmly. Bludvist turned his glare on Heather, who flicked her braid over her left shoulder in a calm manner.

"You swore you would complete the mission!" he growled, his dark eyes gleaming with fury but
the raven-haired woman was unrepentant.

"We completed our part of the plan perfectly," she reminded him coldly. "The execution of the data collection was someone else's responsibility." There was a frozen pause as Drago turned his dead eyes to the deeply tanned shape of his oldest ally and left hand, seeing the man shift in irritation. Krogan was vicious, amoral and ruthless—a perfect partner in Drago's operations and the most fervent adherent to his twisted vision for the future.

"The data should be sufficient," he commented. "There was no mention that the defenders would have their dragons—or that they would put up the level of resistance that we experienced. You had groomed Mildew—the man is ridiculous—but some of the Riders came in and interrupted my work. There was no other opportunity. And the boy has augmented the security around the sensitive systems—including the dragon archives. I'm not certain how much will be accessible through the encryption."

Drago's eyes narrowed: he hated reminding that he had Hiccup in his grasp and the young man escaped, wrecking Drago's systems and forcing a reset and a delay in his plans. And even though the young man had revealed that he had found treasures in the Icelandic National Archives—local resources that Drago had ignored because of their poor condition—the man had sworn to avenge his humiliation. Hiccup had stolen back his own dragon, the young female Night Fury and a selection of baby dragons from the Nest, crashed Drago's system and made a fool of Bludvist. His interference had vexed the Industrialist no end and he foisted his eyes on Heather.

"And how was Stoick's little embarrassment?" he growled. There was a pause and the woman smiled.

"I presume he's dying," she said.

"Presume?"

"He wasn't in the garage—though Toothless the Night Fury was," she revealed. "When I spoke to Astrid, she reacted when I mentioned the leg. I am certain Viggo's present has released the venom now—and as we know, there is no antidote. The venom guarantees death." Drago smiled cruelly, his scarred face twisting as he turned to face the wall, the huge screen displaying a map of the North Atlantic and Northern Europe, much of it coloured with red and varying shades of purple. Heather and Krogan rose and walked slowly to stay behind him, staring at the map, arms folded.

"Finally," Drago breathed. "Once he is dead, the last reminder of my past is avenged and we can proceed. I will not tolerate any further interference in Project Nordica."

I stared at the phone for a long moment, stealing glances at the little picture of the pair of us that Cami had taken and was perched on the desk. Our room looked bombed again—because Hiccup was pathologically incapable of being tidy and we had headed out in a real hurry to catch the sunset for that stupidly romantic and perfect sunset…just before everything went to Hell. Had it only been yesterday?

So I showered, scrubbed my hair clean and allowed the warm water to soothe my aching body, before finally clicking off the shower and wringing my hair out. I dried myself, tended a few bruises and combed my hair through before wandering back into the bedroom to get changed. I was braiding my hair even as I exited our quarters, my ID clipped to the belt of my favourite jeans, a pair of azure blue sketchers and an aquamarine blouse. First stop was the canteen, where I chewed through my muesli without really noticing because I was rehearsing the conversation I needed to
have. Then I sighed: there was no way this was going to be anything but ugly but I owed it to Hiccup to make this call. Then I started as someone sat down opposite me—and I looked up into Thuggery's dark eyes.

"Morning, Lieutenant," I said in a resigned voice. I couldn't help it—not because I disliked Thuggery, because I didn't. He actually seemed like a reasonable guy, just played like a pawn in the General and Throk's game with the Riders. He was disliked by the Riders because he steamed in and messed everything up since he had no concept of his role whatsoever and his second-in-command, Snotlout, was little use in bolstering his reputation with the resentful Riders, who had enjoyed Hiccup's and my leadership. Well, mainly Hiccup's—I was his enforcer and most loyal supporter but I knew which one of us was in charge.

"Lieutenant," he said slightly warily. "May I have a word?" I gestured noncommittally as I scooped up my mug of coffee and took a long sip. I knew it was nearly lunchtime but my head was still muzzy with exhaustion and my body clock was messed up. And to be honest, my concentration was shot because I was horribly worried about Hiccup. "May I call you Astrid?" he asked me sincerely and I nodded.


"I actually prefer Thuggory," he admitted and my eyes focussed on his handsome face.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why Thuggory?" I asked him directly and his eyes slid away, suddenly looking swiftly.

"Um…public school joke," he said in an embarrassed voice. I sipped my coffee as he pulled himself together. "Anyway—I want to offer you an apology…and Hiccup, when he wakes up. I mean, I have been a complete idiot, coming in and thinking I knew better than people who worked with the team for so long and…" He sighed. "How do you get them to do what you want?" he asked in an exasperated voice.

"You earn their respect," I told him simply. "They were foul to me when I arrived—but as things went to Hell, they realised I knew what I was doing and I proved myself to them. Though, I had the advantage of having a dragon. You were foisted on them with no knowledge, no humility and no dragon of your own—so you were an outsider."

He looked at me thoughtfully as I took another long pull on my coffee and then he nodded, his brows furrowing in consideration.

"I see," he said and nodded. "But now I've got Duskstrike…"

"You're now the most junior Rider instead of an outsider," I reminded him. "You still have minimal experience and no seniority in a riding situation." His brows furrowed and he stared at me.

"So how were you accepted?" he demanded. I finished my coffee and smiled.

"A couple of reasons," I explained to him. "First, I never assumed I knew everything when I arrived. I had a healthy dose of humility where the dragons were concerned and I made sure everyone knew that I knew I was a total beginner. Then I had Hiccup. He was lead Rider and he made it his duty—even when he was banned from seeing his own dragon—to take me through learning to ride mine. He is an exceptional man and the most amazing and patient trainer. And finally, I absolutely kicked their asses when they stepped out of line and almost got me and Hiccup
killed. At that point, they realised I could fly bit and I wouldn't take any shit." I stared into his
cynical eyes. "But you've done it the wrong way round. You've been arrogant, overbearing, ignored
their expertise and frankly acted like a total ass. And now you've finally got a dragon...though it
may not stop them still considering you an idiot...and be assured that there will be pranks. Many,
many pranks."

"Really?" he asked, his mind clearly sliding treacherously to an image of the twins. I nodded.

"Look, I have a Nadder so if you have any questions, I'll be happy to help," I offered. His
expression fell and he sighed.

"How is she?" he asked and I sighed.

"Stable-and probably out of danger, though she won't be flying for a while," I revealed. "Heather
tried to kill her: those rounds were armour piercing because dragons are generally bulletproof.
They came prepared for everything." My voice was toneless. "But the offer stands." He nodded.

"Thanks," he said and grinned. "I'm definitely taking you up on that. And-for what it's worth-you
and Hiccup are real leaders in the group. And I think I will need to make sure that the Colonel
understands that."

"Good luck," I said dryly as I stood up and gathered my tray. "Now I have a couple of errands to
run."

"Stormfly?" he asked and I nodded, my lips curling in a smile.

"I'm checking in on my girl," I smiled, "and then I have a call to make."

oOo

After visiting Stormfly, who was insanely pleased to see me and showed it by licking me and
polishing off six cod and two chicken legs, I headed to the Rec Room, wanting to compose myself.
But instead, I found Snotlout, surprisingly trying to compose a report and moaning to the twins,
Mulch and Eret in the hope they would volunteer to help him. Looking at Ruff and Tuff, I sincerely
hoped they wouldn't because God only knows what sort of report we would get from them! As if
was, Snotlout was writing it out longhand using a pencil and whining that he was getting cramp
but he brightened up considerably when he clapped eyes on me.

"Astrid! Lieutenant! Thank Thor you're here!" he said in a relieved tone. "This report! I mean, I've
never had to do one like this before-especially as the senior officer in charge..." There was a
whining, pleading edge to his tone that alerted me and honestly, I wanted to punch him-but instead
I forced myself to give him a benign smile.

"Then it will be good experience for you!" I told him heartlessly and he groaned and face-planted
on the table.

"I can't do it," he mumbled. "I mean, I can describe what we did...as in 'we awesomely kicked
butt', but..."

"We engaged the invaders who were the Grimborns and their allies, including the traitor, Heather
Oswaldson. Using lethal and non-lethal force and with the assistance of the dragons, we threw
them back and secured the base. There were no human fatalities, seven human injuries, two serious
and two draconic injuries with no fatalities." Snotlout was instantly up, scrubbing away at top
speed and I peered over his shoulder, smiling. "Also, there is no place for the word 'awesome' in an
official report, Snot."
There was an awkward pause and he scribbled out a dozen words. I smiled.

"Thanks, Astrid," he mumbled and carried on writing. He wasn't the sharpest knife in the armoury but he was smart enough when it was necessary and I reckoned he could probably manage to complete it. Then I headed for the coms suite and let myself in, showing the soldier my ID and accessing the coms channel direct to B.E.R.K HQ using the priority code.

"Biological European Resource for Counterterrorism," the soldier on the other end said, his German accent brusque. "This is restricted line." I stared at him image on the screen: he was young, blonde and buff while I was in civvies.

"Lieutenant Astrid Helena Hofferson RAMC and BERK, Rider of X-26," I introduced myself equally sternly. "I need to speak to General Stoick Haddock immediately. It is a matter of the utmost urgency. This is Medical Priority One."

"Understood," the soldier said, his deep grey eyes softening. "I will connect you."

There was a pause and I played with my braid, angry at myself for being nervous but I felt guilty. I was a doctor and his girlfriend: I should have noticed sooner. I should have protected him.

"Putting you through, Lieutenant," the soldier said and the image changed to the familiar face of Stoick Haddock, his eyes cool and unfriendly but beard still as magnificent as ever. He stared wordlessly at me, waiting for me to make the first move. I swallowed and took a quick breath.

"General, I know I am not your favourite person right now-but nothing I said was personal, merely professional. I acted as I did to protect Hiccup-and I am doing so again." His face remained carefully neutral. "I believe that in your heart, there is some affection for your only child which is why I am calling you. Hiccup is critically ill-dying really. He has a severe infection in his amputated leg and has been poisoned by the Grimborns."

He stirred then, bushy brows dipping.

"Hiccup," he said softly.

"He is in a coma and cannot contact you-but you are his father and you deserve to know," I said quietly. "I love him and know I would be devastated if he was ill and no one told me. If...if we cannot save him, you at least deserve the chance to make your peace. Whether you choose to act on it is up to you."

"You really think that of me?" he asked quietly. I nodded and for a moment, he looked bereft. "I know I haven't been the best father but I do care for him. I-I just wanted my wife back and losing her so suddenly..." He closed his eyes. "You were right about it all-aberrant and incomplete grief reaction. I've been having intensive psychotherapy, making me face what I did, how I pushed my son aside and isolated him and basically put him through Helheim. And if I could take it back, I would." I managed grim smile.

"Tell me about aberrant grief reactions," I sighed. "Lost my parents in a crash and my Gran when I was on a weekend of training. Never got a chance to say goodbye to any of them. So I know how important that chance is-because regrets are the worst. I really struggled-but I knew I needed help. I got counselling." He looked at me and there was a small smile on his lips.

"You're a smart woman, Astrid," he conceded and there was a shrug of resignation. "And you love him. So please, pay heed to my words. The Grimborns work for Drago so he will be behind this and he will utilise the assets at his disposal. And that means draconic derivatives. He will have
been subjected to a dragon venom. And there will be misdirection and ruthless action on his part. He always hides in plain sight. Never underestimate him." I nodded. "I will ask permission to come and see him. Whether it will be granted is another matter." He reached for the console and then looked me in the eye. "Thank you, Astrid. Do your best to save my boy, will you?"

"You have my word, sir," I promised as he cut the link and I stared at the screen. "You didn't have to ask, Stoick," I murmured. "I would move heaven and earth to save my Hiccup."

oOo

I passed the intelligence on anyway though it was what we had already surmised and while Major Gothi scuttled back to the spectrograph and tox screen, the results of which were due any time, I settled by Hiccup's bedside, resting my hand on his scorching arm. His hands were now swathed in synthetic membrane impregnated in whatever active chemical they had isolated from Night Fury saliva. A small smile played over my lips as I stroked his lightly freckled arm and concentrated in my tablet, knowing Toothless was helping him again.

"It's Scauldron venom," Gothi said in her mechanical voice. "Most dragons aren't that venomous but Scauldron venom is deadly—it will kill within twenty-four hours. Its chemical fingerprint and size suggests a neurotoxin acting on the autonomic nervous system."

"Will? Have you got anything on Scauldron venom?" I asked over my com and there was a pause. When he answered, his voice was grim, very different from his normal tone.

"There is no antidote to Scauldron venom," he said and I looked up into Gothi's bulging eyes. She nodded silently.

"But you can develop an anti-venom to anything..." I protested, recalling what they had told us in the toxicology and tropical medicine modules of my course.

"With time," Gothi conceded. "But time is something we don't have. The sepsis and the massive surge of adrenaline that has produced has protected him so far but as we conquer the infection, the venom will cause his nervous system to collapse and he will die..."

"No," I said, feeling a sudden hollow pain in my chest, instantly rejecting the concept of life without Hiccup. My hand tightened on his lean arm. "No. We cannot give up. There has to be a way, an antidote..."

"There is," Fishlegs said suddenly over the com. I suddenly realised he was in the lab with Will because he was one of the very few people who could read ancient Norse and had been helping translate the scanned documents. "It consists of some herbs, Blue Oleander—and Scauadron venom."

There was a pause and then I looked up at the shape of General Zakhysnyk, who had just walked in for an update and as her cold green eyes swept over us, she voiced everyone's thoughts.

"How on earth are we supposed to get our hands on that?"
Sixty-Three: Treasure Hunt

The soft but quick beep of Hiccup's heart monitor was the only sound in the side room as we all stared at General Zakhysnyk, considering her cold words. And then I slowly smiled.

"Fish-I've heard of Yellow Oleander but never Blue," I told the husky Rider over the com. "Have you looked it up on the World Botany Database?"

"On it now," the familiar voice echoed back. "Hmm…Yellow Oleander-Mediterranean plant, tender to frost, will tolerate UK climate if brought in from frost…"

"And Blue…?" I prompted. There was an embarrassed pause.

"Sorry-Blue Oleander, *Nexium oleander nordica*…found in Eastern Baltic region all the way down to the Black Sea. Can survive as far north as mid-Finland. Wow."

"Well, we certainly haven't got enough time to go to Finland so please tell me we can find it closer to home," I said, my tone a little impatient. This time the pause was hurt.

"Of course…it says here there's some as a permanent exhibit in the Palm House of the Royal Botanic Gardens…"

"…at Kew," I sighed. "Okay, Fish-you're definitely our expert on botany…I know that for a fact," I said thoughtfully. That had been a moderately uninteresting evening-though Hiccup and I politely listened to his excitement at tramping all over the local mountains and moors to locate the elusive local flora. "We'll need to fly you from Glasgow to London Airport and get you to Kew. General-you will need to have the flights organised and get dispensation from the Curator of the Collection to take a sample of the Blue Oleander for Gothi." I paused, frowning. "Take the twins. They are smarter than they look and I think they will both be determined to help Hiccup." The General frowned.

"Lieutenant?" she asked me coolly.

"Fish-can you let Gothi know what herbs you mean?" I asked the other Rider before I looked up at the General. "Ma'am-I can see how to obtain the ingredients for the anti-venom to save Hiccup-and how to deploy our forces to do this."

"But the records indicate that we do not have any Scauldrons in our collection," Zakhysnyk said with a puzzled look. "One hatched but it did not survive. Records suggest it underwent necropsy and samples were kept for anatomical, physiological, biochemical and toxicological information. Do we not have any saved venom?"

"It deteriorates," Gothi told her in her eerie voice. "We could compare the chemical structures-which was why we were able to definitely identify it…but we have none left."

"But I know where there are two juveniles," I interrupted. They all looked at me. "When Hiccup and I liberated the baby dragons and eggs from the nest, we found three Tidal class dragons and…"

"Tidal Class?" the General asked.

"Obligate Aquatic dragons," I explained. "They usually don't fly and don't breathe fire either. For
example, Thunderdrums have a sonic roar while Scauldrons fire superheated scalding water. Anyway, we left two baby Scauldrons and a newly-hatched Bewiderbeast in a suitable location where they can be observed..." And then I stared her straight in the eye. "And this is where you have to get the First Minister of Scotland to cordon off an area using the army to keep the public well away-say you have detected an unexploded World War 2 mine...because we need to go find them and get the venom off the juvenile Scauldrons for Hiccup." There was a pause.

"Where are they?" she demanded.

"Loch Ness."

"Loch Ness?"

"You know-the large freshwater lake that stretches southwest of Inverness? 22 miles long, over 700 feet deep at its deepest, surface area over twenty square miles, famed for its monster? That Loch Ness? Not any of the other hundreds of Loch Nesses all over the place?" My tone had turned sarcastic and my hand instinctively stroked Hiccup's hot arm. The General gave a small scowl.

"I am aware of the geographical feature," she said formally.

"Look, we needed them close and somewhere large enough to contain them but allow them to hide," I explained. "They're aquatic and seemed happy in the fresh water-because the Scauldrons dry out if they're not submerged anyway. And they do have long necks, small heads and a large streamlined body...rather like the traditional image of 'Nessie'." My face had twisted into a small smile.

"That could explain the recent upsurge in reported sightings of the minster," Will piped up over the com. "Some kid published a blurry photograph recently." General Zakhysnyk frowned.

"Though you could mention that it boosts tourism and all they have to do is veto people doing any further scientific studies in the Loch," I suggested. She looked coolly at me.

"Do you want to have this conversation, Lieutenant?" she asked me pointedly and I smiled.

"No, Ma'am," I replied, suddenly cheerful. "Way above my pay grade. I'll be busy prepping the team." Her eyebrow arched. "I need to go on this team. The dragons know me and Hiccup so they should come to me. We bonded with them when they hatched. And we need Toothless because he is Alpha and can call them...and because my girl can't fly at the moment. I would take Snotlout, Gustav and Eret because they and their dragons are fast enough and tough enough to deal with any hostility...not that I'm expecting any. The twins and Fishlegs will go to Kew-but that will be a ND mission."

"ND?"

"No dragons," I said firmly. "Even if we had our own private plane, I am not having the twins blow up a UNESCO world heritage site which is what Kew Gardens is. We need to be in and out and back with the flower. I would normally put Cami-sorry, Specialist Voleur-on that team because she can keep anyone in order and is quick and smart but she's injured and unfit to travel at present. So I would suggest she helps Lieutenant Thyssen on coms at this end. She may be needed to persuade the twins to behave like adults." The General looked at me thoughtfully and then gave a curt nod.

"I accept your recommendation," she said clearly. "Prep your team, Lieutenant. I will take the actions you have suggested and I will also inform Lieutenant Thyssen that as of this time, you are the field commander of the Riders." My smile faltered slightly.
"Until Hiccup is well…and then perhaps you may need to review, Ma'am," I said evenly and she nodded.

"Accepted," she clipped out. "I will speak to Specialist Voleur on the way out." She paused. "Good work, Lieutenant. And nice ring." Then she turned and left as I stared at Major Gothi. She was grinning and wagging her finger at me.

"I'll get the list of herbs from Will so we can have the antidote prepared by the time you get back," she told me in her electronic voice. "And we will continue developing the anti-toxin." Then she left as I turned back to my lover and kissed him gently on his hot forehead.

"Hold on in there, Hiccup," I whispered. "Toothless and I will get that venom and then we can fix this. You're not getting out of the wedding!"

Three shapes walked through the bustle of London City airport, one considerably more uncomfortable than the other two. Fishlegs was in his good suit, the brown tweed incongruous amid the sharp businessmen and smart casuals of the other passengers while the twins were in matching cargo pants, denim jackets and combat boots. Sighing, Fishlegs headed for the taxi rank and checked his phone, sighing at the message from Will and the image of the plant. The Blue Oleander was pretty in its own way, not especially hardy and poisonous to reptiles.

He slammed to a halt and the twins crashed into him.

"Hey, dude-why did you stop?" Tuff protested from the floor where he had ended up after bouncing off the husky rider.

"Poisonous to reptiles!" Fishlegs squeaked.

"What is?" Ruff grumbled, hauling her brother to his feet.

"The Blue Oleander-the plant we're after-is poisonous to reptiles," Fishlegs explained with forced patience.

"I hate reptiles," Tuff announced, shaking his head. "I…"

"You do realise that Barf'n'Belch are a reptile?" his sister asked him pointedly.

"AARGH!"

"And…he's going to freak out for the rest of the trip," Ruff said smugly. They moved to the front of the queue and Fishlegs flagged down the nearest black cab.

"Kew Gardens," he said and the cabbie eyed him suspiciously.

"That's the other side of London, mate," he said seriously. "That's gonna cost a fortune." Ruff grinned as she and her brother scrambled into the back of the cab then reached out and grabbed Fishlegs.

"No sweat," she said, brandishing a credit card. "Company expenses!" They slammed the door and shoved Fish back into a seat and Tuff waved at the cabbie, a wild grin on his face.

"So, my good man-drive!" he said.
It was grey and cool over Loch Ness as we swooped down through the clouds, checking our coms and helmet displays to confirm that the area was clear, courtesy of the local police and army. I knew the General had a long conversation with the First Minister and that we had the full backing of the Scottish Inner Cabinet. But as we arrowed south-east, along the long axis of the Loch away from Inverness, the mountains rising to each side of us, I peered at the 'heads-up' display projected onto my visor and sighed: there were no signs of life—though with an average depth of four hundred feet, it was possible they were out of range.

Toothless grumbled under me and I sighed. He had been agreeable enough to go on a flight—because Hiccup had made absolutely sure I knew how to fly him and work the pedals to his prosthetic tail—but I wasn't sure he would understand what I was going to ask him to do. The others were in formation behind us and as we spread out and flew lower to the waves, I pressed a hand on the top of his head.

"Can you call the dragons, Toothless?" I asked. "We need Snowy and the Scauldrons to help Hiccup." There was a pause and then he gave a little rumbling noise I recognised as his version of a laugh—before he roared. A faint blue glow lit the blunt triangular spines that ran down his back and I heard the sounds reverberate across the water, echoing back and forth from the hills to either side. We whipped past Castle Urquhart on our right and Toothless roared again.

"This is going to attract attention," Eret noted over the com.

"True," I admitted, "but it's the only way we have to locate the young Scauldrons…"

"So you really dumped them here?" Snotlout asked me. "And you nursed them all the way back from the Nest?"

"They go a horrible grey when they start to dry out," I revealed. "We got very splashed diving down and getting them wet enough to fly on for another hour or so. It was…instructive…"

"And there's no way they could have escaped?" Gustav asked guilelessly. I rolled my eyes.

"The Caledonian Canal runs out of the Loch and if they were desperate, they could travel up to the Moray Firth…but why would they leave a lovely safe huge Loch all to themselves?" I asked rhetorically. Toothless roared again and I found I was holding my breath—until I saw shapes burst through the surface about a mile south. We zoomed towards them as Toothless roared—and higher pitched roars echoed back. I rubbed his head affectionately. "Good work, bud," I smiled.

"I don't believe it," Snotlout muttered over the com. "Everyone gets to fly Toothless except me…"

"I only fly Toothless because he's the Alpha and Hiccup taught me," I replied tartly. It was actually still hilarious when Snotlout huffed over the Night Fury, because we all knew he wouldn't change Hookfang for any other dragon. The Nightmares took up point as Toothless swooped round the young dragons that had broken surface and back-winged until we were hovering just above the grey water. The Scauldrons looked in really good condition, their vibrant azure colouring brilliant against the gloomy backdrop, their eyes wide and friendly as they pressed their muzzles into my hands.

"Hey, guys," I grinned, unable to stop from smiling at their affection, "I guess you're enjoying your new home, hmm?" There was a rush of water as the third shape broke the surface and I met the cold blue eyes of Snowy with a smile. Hiccup had told me about the phenomenal growth rate young dragons showed and I was astonished that the young Bewilderbeast was now probably three feet in height from a creature I could hold in my hand a few weeks ago. The white dragon immediately pressed his flat face into my hand, purring while the Scauldrons nudged me for
attention and I smiled, petting them all equally. The others were gaping.

"When did Astrid turn into a dragon whisperer?" Gustav asked grumpily, sitting casually on Fanghook. The youngest Rider had recently idolised Hiccup when he had finally realised how amazing the auburn-haired Rider actually was—and he was immensely peeved that I seemed to be able to do things only Hiccup could.

"I have spent a lot of time with him," I reminded the young rider. "Engaged, remember?" Gustav rolled his eyes.

"Really?" he asked. "I mean, I thought you just said that to keep your rooms together…" I growled in my throat.

"Toothless—do you want to eat him or should I leave it to the Scauldrons?" I asked firmly.

"Hey!"

Toothless gave his laughing warble that meant he had caught onto the joke as I fished out a pair sharps boxes from the saddle and we hovered a little lower towards the Scauldrons. "Hey, guys—I really need you to bite these…" They looked at me with big innocent eyes and I sighed. It had been a long shot…so I shoved a brace of fish in the bottom of the bins and held them out. "Off you go!" I grinned and predictably, their stomachs took charge. The bins were a little too small for them to get their whole heads in, so they bit on the edge, trying to snag the mackerel with their teeth—and dribbles of venom trickled down the inside of the bins, the plastic dented by the eagerness of the dragons and their very sharp teeth. Finally, after a couple of minutes and about a hundred mils of venom later, both got their prizes and tossed them up, eagerly swallowing the oily prizes. I carefully clicked the tops secure on the bins and stowed them before leaning down and offering Snowy a fish, which he delicately accepted, purring against me once more.

"WALKER!" Eret shouted and I glanced up, angered. We had been promised isolation and a secure location by the Scottish First Minister and for the location to be compromised was very dangerous. Fortunately, it was grey and we were hovering low, hopefully lost against the mountains and trees and we were in uniform with helmets disguising our faces anyway. I motioned to the young Tidal Class dragons.

"Off you go, boys," I said calmly, careful not to spook them. "We'll be back soon and we'll bring Hiccup and Stormfly next time, okay?" They gave a variety of small roars and dived into the loch as we pulled into tight formation and arrowed directly up into the low cloud. It was starting to drizzle and I was grateful it would discourage anyone else. And then we were swallowed by the clouds as I opened the channel back to the base.

"Patch me through to the General," I said firmly. "We have a problem…"

oOo

Cami was lounging on her bed in her pyjamas, staring at her mobile phone. Being isolated in the Base with no one around gave her space to think—and it wasn’t one of her favourite occupations, because she had things she didn’t want to concentrate on. But here she was, her stomach tender and placed on medically-enforced rest with basically the rest of the team out on a mission and her back home. She was wearing her com earpiece so she could listen in but in reality, Major Gothi had threatened to sedate anyone who allowed her to get up and about.

Idly, she thumbed her way back through the photos—most of which were her with the Riders, especially Ruff and Heather. The most recent were with Astrid as well…and finally with Hiccup.
She sighed: they had all misjudged him and he had persistently come though and saved them from their own stupidity. True, Astrid had made them into a proper military unit but Hiccup had made them a team…and now he was dying.

The images scrolled by and she stilled, her eyes widening at an old image she had scanned in: her clan, standing by the camp site and grinning at the camera. Her mother, Bertha, the clan Chief, was in the centre, her formidable shape solid and her arms folded across her impressive chest. She shared the blue eyes and blonde hair of her daughter, her expression stern. Beside her were the rest of the family—Little Liam, Eamonn, Sean, Bryan, Padraig, Roisin and Bernadette—all sharing the blonde or strawberry hair of the family, their blue eyes widened and faces lit with grins. It was the image she treasured because it was how she remembered them, for it was the last picture she had of them.

And Hiccup had volunteered to help. She shuddered. Somehow, she had forgotten, because it was so much easier to run with the crowd and ostracise him than to acknowledge his generosity and kindness—even to those who had never been kind to him.

Learning of her lost family—even though she had been as scathing and cruel to him as the rest—he had quietly approached her when the others were in the Mess and had stood, awkward and self-conscious, as he cleared his throat.

"I…I…um…heard about your family…" he managed in an anxious voice.

"So? What's it to you?" Her voice had been cruel and harsh, making him flinch. He had only been at BERK for a year and Toothless was still a juvenile, though the bond he had with the skinny outsider was remarkable and even Cami recognised their unique relationship. His bright green eyes looked down for a second and then he sighed.

"I know what it's like to lose people you care for," he told her softly. "Your family is missing. Maybe I can use the resources of BERK IT to search for them?" She stared at him.

"They're travellers," she pointed out sarcastically. "They tend to live off the grid…"

"Even if they use only cash and have no digital presence, they will pass cameras occasionally—and if you give me a photo of your family, I can set up a scouter algorithm to seek their images on any cameras connected to the web." His voice had grown eager but it stuttered to a halt as she glared at him.

"Are you kidding?" she snapped. "You think it would be that easy to find people who don't want to be found?" He stared at her.

"I-I don't understand," he stammered, his eyes widening in shock. "Why—why would they not want to be found?" Her eyes narrowed.

"They don't trust you people," she snapped. "Too many see us as a menace and chase them away whenever they try to camp…" He looked at her.

"But why would they leave and not tell you?" he asked simply. "Why would they not send you word?" She glared at him in fury, her hurt and confusion boiling over.

"Because they were protecting me!" she snapped. "Now leave it, Useless—I'll sort it out in my own way!"

And he had backed away, the hurt look intense in his eyes, shoulders hunched that his tentative attempt to help had been spurned. Cami almost called him back, an inexplicable feeling of guilt.
washing over her—that was just as swiftly dismissed when Heather commed her that they were paying girls versus boys Twister in the Mess. But occasionally, she wondered what would have happened if she had taken him up on his offer…

She shook her head. She was stubborn and stupid and her actions may have denied her the chance to find her family…but Hiccup could never understand that this was Clan business. And she would never involve an outsider—not even a comrade who had fought at her side for so long. She shook her head and sighed…until her phone buzzed. Idly, she thumbed up the message—and then her eyes widened and she sat up sharply, her hand pressing against her wound.

HEY CAMCA. ITS MOM. SORRY ITS BEEN SO LONG. THE CLAN NEEDS YOU. FOLLOW MY INSTRUCTIONS TO THE LETTER…

Her breath caught in her throat and she reread the words over and over.

After so many years, she had proof.

Her family were alive.

oOo

The taxi pulled up of the gates of the Royal Botanical Gardens and the driver gratefully discharged his passengers, even giving them a discount to just stop the female leering at him and her brother from trying to help the cabbie drive. It had been the worst fare of his life. The screech of tyres and tooting of horns as he pulled away and accelerated across the traffic and away from the three passengers was testament to his dismay.

"And I thought we were getting on so well," Tuff sighed as he stared through the traffic chaos and then reluctantly turned back to follow the other two into the gardens. They paid their entrance fees and headed directly for the Palm House, after telling the woman on the ticket desk they had an appointment with the Curator.

Fishlegs was in heaven, his eyes popping at the sight of every rare specimen and he almost seized up with excitement as he stared across the grounds, seeing the giant redwoods, the multiplicity of gum trees, firs, stands of broadleaf trees and the huge oaks. Ruff rolled her eyes, grabbed his arms and hauled him along the path towards the glass and iron structure that was the iconic Palm House. Even Tuff was impressed as they approached, though he was wondering what would happen if he hit one of the panes of glass—or sang a really high note.

"I could elbow you in the balls to see how that goes," Ruff offered and he paused, brows dipping as he considered the scenario.

"Ah," he hummed. "I think…not…” Fishlegs stared at them, a small smile lifting his lips at the sight of Ruff's disappointed expression. She was crazy and wild and totally the opposite of his timid and introverted personality, but he did like her.

"Maybe later," he suggested and then walked through the door.

A man was waiting for him, a thin specimen in his fifties wearing a rumpled brown suit with his half-moon glasses sliding down his thin nose. His greying sandy hair was a little wild and his blue eyes were thoughtful.

"Mr Ingerman?" he asked and Fishlegs grasped the proffered hand, shaking it eagerly.

"Curator Jackson! I'm so pleased to be here! This is just the most astonishingly amazing place!" he
gushed and the curator managed a thin smile, his moustache arching over his thin mouth.

"The Director of an E.U agency called BERK contacted me that you needed this specimens as a matter of national importance," he revealed as the twins frowned, sharing a glance. "Though I am unsure what a multi governmental agency would want with a small, unimpressive Mediterranean plant?"

"I'm afraid it's classified," Fishlegs said politely, his round face cracking a smile. "Could we see the specimen?" The Curator nodded, gesturing towards the main body of the Palm House.

"This way," he said as they stepped into the lush surroundings. Tuff glanced up at the verdant palms hanging overhead and his face twisted in an admiring grin.

"Whoa…" he commented. "Is it true there's a plant called a Suicide Palm in here? I mean, how does that work? Does it behead itself or deliberately fall over and crush someone or…"

"I think he said 'Suicide' not 'Murder'," Ruff commented dryly. "Though a Murder Palm would be awesome…"

"Shhh!" Fishlegs hissed, casting them a disapproving glare before he speed up to walk alongside the Curator. "So how long have you had this plant?" The Curator smiled.

"Ah…the Blue Oleander was a generous donation from a benefactor who recognised its uniqueness as a plant that likes Mediterranean surroundings but flourishes all the way up to the Finnish Lakes," he said. "Nerium oleander azuris-usually mislabelled as nordica-the Blue Oleander…"

And he gestured to a stunted, scrubby plant no more than three inches high and completely devoid of the five-petalled blue flowers that the document had said was essential to save their friend. Gaping, the husky rider gestured.

"Um…what's that?" he asked. The Curator smiled thinly.

"Our specimen," he explained. "It's quiescent after a bad bout of Nerium Blight. I thought you wanted to see it…" Fishlegs turned to him and gritted his teeth.

"We needed a flower," he said firmly. "Didn't they explain we needed a sample? It is vital for a medical procedure essential to save a friend." He paused. "Do you have any dried or preserved specimens?" The Curator shook his head.

"Not of this species," he admitted casually. "It is a relatively common plant so hasn't been a high priority for storage in the plant seed database…I believe it's in the next tranche of storages, starting in June…"

"Which is no use for us at all," Fishlegs told him sternly. "Our friend will be dead by then…" Eyes widening, the Curator took a deep breath.

"I am truly sorry," he said evenly. "Maybe my colleague in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris will have an active specimen that could provide what you need. I can call him…" Swallowing, Fishlegs nodded.

"Please do," he said quietly and followed the man as he headed towards one side, through a door into the small office, grateful that the twins remained outside among the plants…though concerned that they would cause all sorts of mayhem once they were out of sight. The door clicked shut as the twins shared a glance and then walked casually away from the office.

"Okay-so we know he's lying his face off," Tuff commented in a low voice. "Where do you think
the real plant is?"

"He's a horrible liar and clearly hopelessly bad at deception so probably in the exact opposite direction to the way he brought us," Ruff agreed and they spun on their heels and walked purposefully towards the other end of the Palm House, their eyes scanning the neat beds for the plant they had looked up on the way course, Fishlegs was in charge and knew the most about plants, being a botany geek, but Tuff had insisted they both memorise the plant as well. It had been one of the few times he had shown much focus but he had been dismayed at hearing Hiccup was dying and his sister recognised this as one of the times he was actually 100% on mission. Though of course, that never precluded some minor messing around…

They had almost reached the far end when they both stared at a clump of healthy green plants, their small green leaves topped by bunches of azure blue five-petalled flowers. Ruff crouched down.

"Is this it?" she asked and her twin nodded.

"Of course, why the Curator is lying is another matter," he murmured and nodded as Ruff rapidly plucked a handful of flowers and slid them into a sealable plastic freezer bag, then carefully tucked it onto her inside jacket pocket. "You want to go and rescue Fish, Butt-elf? I think we need a small diversion…and I want to see the Murder Palm!" There was a wild look in his eye and Ruff nodded, heading swiftly back to the office…as Tuff glanced up and waited until she was out of sight. Swiftly, he grabbed another handful of flowers and then stowed his prizes before he stood up and gave a wild yodel.

"Don't mess with the Thorstons," he murmured and sprinted off in the direction of the arrows pointing towards 'Suicide Palm'.

The Curator was putting the receiver down on his old-fashioned landline as Ruff pushed the door to the office open, his face carefully neutral.

"Their plant is healthy but, of course, they flower July to October," he explained. "I do believe they have dried specimens and I am certain they will be able to supply your needs." He took off his glasses and cleaned them methodically with his handkerchief, before perching them back on his nose. "I am truly sorry we were unable to help you, Mr Ingerman…" He rose and taking his cue, Fishlegs got up as well, the plastic garden chair creaking in relief. They shook hands.

"I am grateful for your assistance," he said genuinely as the female twin gestured. "I believe we are on a timetable to catch our flight." He nodded and followed the Curator to the door of the Palm House…as Tuff raced by, waving a coconut triumphantly.

"Suicide Coconut!" he yelled and sprinted out into the grounds, heading for the Main Entrance. The Curator stared…and then scowled.

"I have been more than generous and for you to repay my assistance with this vandalism is…" he began angrily.

"Hypocrisy," Ruff growled, her eyes narrowing. "You've been lying first to last. You're nervous, you won't meet our eyes, your mannerisms show you're concealing something and your vocal pitch was higher than it is now, when you've relaxed because you think you've succeeded. Whoever you were talking to-it wasn't the Directeur du Jardin des Plantes de Paris!" She folded her arms and glared as the Curator and Fishlegs both gaped at her furious accusation and perfect French accent. "Come on, Fish. Let's go find my idiot brother and get a taxi back to the airport."

As she strode off furiously, Fishlegs gave a cool glare at the Curator and then turned away,
walking quickly towards the main exit. The Curator sagged in relief: if it hadn't been the man who had called him, he would have done his best to help the three visitors. He just hoped he had done the right thing…

In an unsuspecting taxi heading across London for the City Airport, Ruff explained what she had Tuff had discovered while her brother cuddled the stolen coconut. Fishlegs shook his head in shock.

"But…why?" he protested. "I mean…why would he lie?"

"Because someone told him to," Tuff told him simply. "All we need is to find out who called him and then we'll have an idea…"

"Except that we need to full IT setup including Hiccup to sift through all the calls to the Botanical Gardens…" Fishlegs mused.

"No-just to the Curator," Ruff pointed out. "Though this whole thing stinks…" Tuff gave a slow grin.

"Sorry—that was me," he apologised and began to fumble with the fastening of his pants. Fishlegs yelped and covered his eyes.

"Gods-Tuffnut Laverne Thorsten! NO!" he yelped but Tuff was laughing almost hysterically.

"Chill, Fish!" he sniggered and retrieved the other stolen item from his loose pants. "You're not ready for my awesomeness. But I think you would be the best person to deal with this…" And he shoved a plant into Fishlegs's hands The large Rider stared at him in utter shock. "You can thank me later. It's a backup…" And he fished out the flowers he had harvested from the other plants from his pockets. "Think you can use these?" The husky Rider nodded.

"How…?" he gaped as Ruff opened her freezer bag and Tuff slid his offerings in as well, before she sealed it and handed it to Fishlegs. The man stowed it in his battered brown manbag and then cradled the plant in his arms. The twins high-fived.

"Now all we need to do is get back in time," Ruff said as her brother grinned and swivelled round, leering at the cabbie.

"A hundred pounds bonus if you get us to the airport for the 4.45 flight!" he said. The cabbie grinned.

"You're on!" he said and floored it.
Hiccup's numbers were deteriorating as I sat at his side, murmuring repeated entreaties to stay with me. He was warm and still breathing but I was scared he was slipping away from me, laid low by the combination of infection and poison. And I honestly had no clue what I could do if I lost him, if I could never stare into those beautiful green eyes, never hear his sass or feel the warmth of his hand, twined with mine. I had given him my heart, been with him through thick and thin and agreed to spend the rest of my life with him. And though the twins and Fish had found the Blue Oleander, I was worried that it may be too late.

Major Gothi walked in with Ragnar, holding a 100ml fluid bag containing a turbid mixture that I presumed was the antivenom and proceeded to attach a giving set and carefully run it through before attaching it to his cannula.

"I've followed the instructions as much as I can, considering the document is a thousand years old," she said in her eerie electronic voice. "I hope it works." I nodded and stared at the fluid as she opened the giving set…and then suddenly leapt forward, pinching the tube and flipping the attachment to the cannula closed.

"NO!" I barked out, panic suddenly filling me. "Major-it's a thousand years old. They didn't have intravenous drugs then! This is an oral medication…containing the same venom that has brought him to the brink of death. He can't have this IV!" I was feverishly unfastening the tube to ensure none of the mixture got into his system, even opening the port after I had detached the 'cure' to flush any of it out. "It's oral." She frowned and then waved a finger thoughtfully.

"Hmm…the perils of working in modern medicine," she admitted with chagrin. "I assumed it was IV, like current anti-venoms. You are absolutely correct, Astrid. I suspect there must be a first-pass effect in the liver which deactivates the venom or makes it beneficial…" She took the giving set and smiled, then fixed it to his NG tube, the nasogastric tube that ran through his nose down to his stomach. With a wordless prayer, she opened the tap and I saw the mixture slowly trickle down the tube into my fiancé. My hands tightened on his and I leaned forward to kiss him.

"Come back to me, Hiccup," I whispered. "We've got you the antidote. Now you have to fight to come to me and Toothless once more. I believe in you…because you're amazing. And I love you." I closed my eyes and felt them prickle with tears. "I love you…"

"Am I intruding?" My head snapped up and I glared at Thuggory, who had interrupted my moment.

"Guess," I said flatly and he sighed.

"Sorry." He sounded genuine as he walked forward. "I've got some bad news. We've looked everywhere in the Base but as far as we can tell, Specialist Cami Voleur has gone. She's disappeared."

Colonel Mildew was characteristically unhelpful, grumbling that no one behaved like a proper soldier anyway and why was anyone surprised that Cami had vanished. But I was, because we were her friends and Ruff and I, at least, expected that she would have told us if she was bailing on the team. I was worried because she was recuperating from a pretty vicious stab wound-even
though the knife had only hit muscle and skin, rather than any vital organs-and she really should be resting rather than using her best stealth abilities. And she did have good stealth abilities-because she had vanished without being picked up on the cameras. Ruff and I guessed she had gone through the ducts, because it was very obvious that she knew her way around them well…and Hiccup and I knew there was a way to the outside if you knew exactly where to find it.

Swiftsoar, her dragon, was still in the Pens with the others and Thuggery and I stared sympathetically at the Hobblegrunt: she wouldn't understand why her Rider had vanished because I didn't either.

"She gave no sign?" the lieutenant asked me and I shook my head.

"I know that she loves her dragon and will protect her against anything," I murmured, staring at the dragon as she sat hunched up, her colours fading through green to a sad deep blue. "She means more to Cami than anything…" And then I paused. "Except her family." I looked up at Thuggory and his dark eyes widened.

"I thought they had vanished?" he asked me, perplexed. I nodded.

"Never made a meeting and no sign of them for years," I agreed. "But they are very clan orientated and she would respond if they called her and she wouldn't tell us-because her loyalty is first and foremost to her family. It may be a happy coincidence…though I would hope she would leave Ruff or I a message." I sighed. "And I suppose I have to mention how suspicious it is that her family just reappears shortly after we've been attacked and repelled Drago's people. And not that long after he had Hiccup trawl through our personnel records…" Thuggory folded his arms and stared at the whimpering dragon. Toothless and Meatlug bounded up to her and pressed against her sides, nuzzling her and crooning reassurance. It was really very sweet-just what you would expect from a leader.

"You have a point, Lieutenant," Thuggory admitted. "I just hope she hasn't deactivated her tracker…" And I nodded. She was smart and if she really didn't want to be followed, she would find some way to burn it out. We walked down to the security office and I was pleased to see Sergeant Grimsdaal on duty. He smiled and saluted us both then listened to our request. Then he tapped in Cami's tracker and after a pregnant pause, the little blip appeared on the screen…beyond the north-western coastline, out in the sea.

My eyes narrowed and I drew an imaginary line between the base and her current position…and then extrapolated in onwards. My jaw dropped.

"She's heading…for Iceland," I said.

oOo

Hiccup didn't wake. His numbers were improving by the day, his lactate dropping, oxygen and inotrope requirements diminishing and systems returning towards normal but there wasn't any improvement in his conscious level. No spontaneous movement, no REM, minimal spontaneous respiratory effort. It was like he was still sedated. And even Gothi had no clue when or if he would ever wake.

So I did what any good soldier would do: I got on with my duties. I worked in the Infirmary, flew Toothless, petted Stormfly and reassured her that I would fly her soon, when her wing was healed and trained with the Riders. But I spent every spare moment in Hiccup's room, by his side, holding his hand and talking to him, relating what the others had been up to or what I was reading. I spoke of the wedding and reassured him that we would sort it all out once he was awake. And I told him
constantly that I loved him and wanted him and would never let him go.

Until I received the text. It directed me to a folded letter concealed under the coffee machine in the Mess—where no one would ever bother to look because no one ever tidied up. Quietly, I grabbed it and went to sit with Hiccup as I read it. Then I re-read it, staring at Cami's words and considered what she was asking for. It was a lot—especially with Hiccup still incapacitated…but she had trusted me and me alone.

I told him. I read the letter aloud. And then I sighed and held his hand.

"If I do this, babe, I'll have to leave you for a time," I said softly. "And I really don't want to…but Cami has asked me to help her…and I think she is trying to help us." I looked at his pale face and then leaned forward, tenderly kissing his forehead, after stroking his auburn hair off his face. "I promise you, my love—I will be back. Wait for me, my Dragon Boy."

Then I turned and walked to the General's office, knocking on the door and entering when invited. I stared into her cool green eyes and took a deep breath.

"I need to request a sabbatical," I said clearly to her. "I need to leave BERK."

It was late as Gobber made his way down to the basement level station and he stood quietly as the single modified engine carriage pulled up at the single platform. There was a pause and the door opened, revealing the impressive uniformed shape of General Stoick Haddock. Gobber cocked an eyebrow and looked passively at his oldest friend.

"I see yeh finally turned up," the two-limbed Colonel said dryly. Stoick snorted, his cool grey-green eyes slightly embarrassed.

"Not that easy to get time off from Brussels and just head off back here," he grumbled lightly. "The cogs of the machine turn very slowly in any multinational organisation." He sighed. "This is why I preferred being here, away from the suits and just doing the job…" Gobber rolled his eyes.

"Not that yer were able tae do it properly," he commented. The General sighed. "Yer head better or are yer still blamin' that boy fer Drago's actions?" Stoick took a couple of paces forward and then he nodded reluctantly.

"That lass knows more—and sees more—than I ever could," he admitted slowly. "I've had intensive psychotherapy…and am on antidepressants." He gave a wry laugh. "Never thought that the great Stoick 'the Vast' Haddock would have to rely on a chemical crutch to deal with Val's loss…but maybe, if I had sought help much sooner, I wouldn't have ruined my son's life."

"Aye," Gobber commented grimly and then fell into step alongside him as the two headed for the elevator. "I see the lass called yer." Stoick nodded.

"She feels that I deserve to see him, even if…" His voice faltered. "How is he?"

Gobber paused as the elevator rose to the Infirmary level.

"He's been close to death for a while, but the Riders found the antidote…" Stoick turned to him and frowned.

"Antidote?" he asked. "Gobber—what happened?" The door opened and the Colonel ambled onto the white metal corridor and headed for the Infirmary. Stoick followed.
"Yeh remember *that* mission?" he asked pointedly.

"What…?"

"The mission where the lad surrendered himself tae save Astrid and try tae get Toothless away from the Grimborns and Drago?" Gobber reminded him sharply. "The one where yer put him in jail and dinna get him checked out properly as yer should which would ha' avoided all of this?"

Stoick's brows dipped and he sighed.

"Okay, I…understand," he admitted.

"They'd put trackers in him-how they knew he was out o' the Base when they attacked," Gobber admitted. "And they also left a capsule containing Scauldron venom that was meant tae release and kill him. But they also inadvertently left him with an infection in the stump so he became seriously ill and that slowed the venom down…that and the burns from the Changewing acid…" Stoick grabbed his arm.

"Gobber," he said gravely, "is he alright? Is he *alive?*

"See fer yourself," he said and led Stoick through the night-time infirmary, with the dimmed lights and minimal staffing levels, until they reached the quiet side room that Hiccup had occupied since his admission. Then he stood back and allowed Stoick to walk in-to see the long, lean shape of his son, lying still under the sheets. There was a hospital gown loosely resting across his body, though his naked shoulders were visible, still smattered with freckles. A tube was still in his mouth, the ventilator hissing slowly as it supported his irregular breathing and his eyes were closed. His hands were still wrapped in pale green webbing containing gauze soaked in medically-modified Night Fury saliva. There was a fair amount of stubble on his jaw and he looked pale and thinner than usual. Drips were taped to both arms and the gentle beep of his heart beat sounded in the room.

Stoick's breath hitched, seeng his son so sick and surrounded by so many machines. In the dim lighting, the dark auburn hair and shape of the face reminded him more intensely than ever of his lost wife and he walked silently towards the still shape.

"Son," he murmured, sitting slowly in the seat by the bed. Cautiously, he took the limp, warm hand, feeling the warmth through the gauze. "I've come because I heard you were sick…" Gobber rolled his eyes and quietly—for him—slipped from the room, leaving the General with his son. Stoick's thick fingers stroked the limp hand.

"You know, I owe you a hundred apologies for so many times I neglected and blamed you wrongfully," he said heavily. "I have been the worst father and probably a dreadful commander. And your mother would be ashamed at how I treated her beloved Hiccup. I never doubted that she loved you and I allowed my grief at losing her to make me blame you for living. I rejected the last piece of her I had left and I abandoned you to a life of hardship and neglect when I could have done so much more. And even when I brought you here, I never treated you like my son. I am ashamed at my conduct, at how I have betrayed my wife and my own son."

The soft beep continued, unchanged and the figure remained motionless, save the slight rise and fall of his chest as the ventilator sporadically hissed.

"Astrid called me," he said. "Odin-she loves you, doesn't she? She showed how far she'll go to protect you—even attacking me. And that was…impressive. I have never been so effectively and comprehensively outmanoeuvred before. She's an impressive woman and a fine officer and I think…you couldn't do better. Gobber told me that you are engaged and I honestly could not be happier that you have someone in your life who will love and care for you…especially since you
have such a useless father."

He paused and stared at the familiar features, slack in repose and he gently stroked his son's cheek. At that moment, he would have given everything to stare into those emerald eyes once more.

"I could not be more proud, Hiccup," he said quietly. "You have become a brave and clever man, a great leader and a determined and brilliant young man. You're not the ferocious and archetypal soldier that I imagined my son would be-you take so much more after your mother. She was smart, thoughtful, caring and loved you so much. She would have loved the dragons too, son. I am sorry you are here, unconscious and can't hear me say this but it's all true. Your lass got me the help I needed…and I will be back in HQ, protecting you and making sure you have what you need. There is more going on than you understand but believe me…I will be back, son. And I love you…"

There was the slightest tightening of his fingers around the large hand and Stoick's eyes widened—but there was no other sign of life. The soft beep continued unchanged, the ventilator hissed and the General sat back, holding his son's hand.

"I'll just stay here for a while, if you don't mind, son," he murmured with a small smile tilting his lips. "Just for a short while…with my son."

oOo

He was walking quietly down to the station once more, having gone to Gobber's office and shared a whiskey with his old friend. Gobber had loosened up a little and filled Stoick in on what had been happening since he left. The General has listened quietly, asking just a few questions to clarify some points and nodding.

"I presume General Zakhysnyk has taken appropriate measures to ensure no repetition of the attack," he said blandly. "I have every confidence in her abilities. She is a very qualified administrator." And then they had made small talk, reminisced and shared a joke or three before Stoick had headed back to his transport. But as he walked into the station, a stocky shape was waiting for him.

"Were you just planning on leaving without saying anything?" Snotlout asked, his arms tense at his sides, his fists balled. Stoick stopped and his eyes widened before he nodded.

"I am not authorised to be here," he confessed. "But my son may be dying and I wanted to speak to him. To just see him once more."

"And what about me?" the Rider demanded, his voice angry. "Did you think it was okay to just sneak in and out and never say a word?"

"What could I say?" the General asked him directly. "I'm not officially here."

"But you are," Snotlout told him simply. "I'm your relative as well. There are only the three of us. So anything you want to say?" There was an awkward pause and the stocky young man rolled his eyes. "Thor-I see what Hiccup meant about you being a terrible father!" he commented and the General stared at him, his bushy brows dipping.

"You're right," he said slowly. "But I've been working through things…because Astrid was right. I have a lot of issues…including grief and guilt at my brother's death. That I shot him. That I couldn't stop him or get through to him. That I failed you." Snotlout's eyes sparkled for a moment and then he sighed.

"Hiccup has been…well, great," he admitted. "When Dad died, he was there for me. So was
Astrid, to be honest. You weren't. But I understand it was hard for you as well. He was your brother and you had to kill him." Stoick rested a hand on his tense shoulder and tightened his grip slightly.

"I'm sorry-I should have done more," he sighed. "I-I just got out of the habit of being a father and…"

"I don't need a father," Snotlout cut in, his tone tight. "I need my Uncle to be there when I need him." He sighed. "But I'm worried about Hiccup too. I know we got the Scauldron venom and Fish and the twins got this plant that they needed and Gothi and the team administered it. He's getting better…physically…but he hasn't woken. No one knows when or if he will. And Astrid has taken a sabbatical away from BERK." Stoick stared at him in shock.

"She's left?" he asked. Snotlout nodded.

"She said she had to check something out back home," he admitted. "But when Cami left, she knew something. I know she'll come back because she's crazy about Hiccup. Until then…I'm keeping an eye on Commander Dragon Boy." Stoick cocked an eyebrow. "Um…it's sort of what we call him…well, Astrid does, but the rest of us have just sort of adopted it…"

"Hmph. Commander is still a Naval rank," Stoick grumbled, though his lips were lifted in a small smile. "But thank you, Snotlout." He paused and then awkwardly hugged the stocky young man. There was a pause and then they parted, both not meeting each other's eye.

"Look-we still haven't had Dad's service," Snotlout said awkwardly. "I would really like you to come back when we do. I'll send for Mom and of course, Hiccup and Astrid will be there…" The silence yawned for a long moment as Snotlout's face suddenly looked determined. "Because he will get better. No matter what happens, I know that Astrid will return for him and somehow, some way, she will get him to wake and return to her. And honestly, I wouldn't put it past her to punch anyone who gets in her way!" Stoick chuckled then and patted Snotlout's shoulder once more.

"I'm glad we got to have this talk, son," he murmured. "Be safe. You know you can contact me any time?" Snotlout nodded as the General clambered back into his modified railway carriage and his escort closed the door. The stocky rider watched as the carriage pulled away and vanished into the darkness.

"See you soon, Uncle Stoick," he murmured.

My apartment was dusty and a little musty but pretty much intact and it was a relief of familiarity as I walked through the door and dumped my single bag into the floor as I locked the door behind me. I flipped the lights on and stared at my home, seeing the scrapes on the floor from where I had dragged Hiccup to the spare room when he fainted and as I walked slowly through the main room. Then I stared at the spare bedroom, seeing the rumpled bed, my discarded dressing gown and I sighed. If I had left the gym five minutes earlier or later, I never would have met him and none of this would have happened.

I blinked and sighed, then made my way to the fridge, stared at the collection of interesting and hugely out of date foods before fetching a bin bag and emptying everything out. Then I wiped down the whole fridge with dilute bleach and cleaned down the kitchen and bathroom, before I paused. Then I went and stripped the beds, shoved the sheets in the washing machine and remade my bed. Finally, once the machine was washing and I had had a black coffee, I went out and bought some longlife milk, some bread, eggs and other food and once that was stowed, I headed to the
gym, had a good workout, showered and then headed back to the University.

It was weird being back but I dropped in to see my old tutor and to say he was surprised to see me was an understatement-but when he greeted me with a grin and a wry "Hello, Dr Hofferson," it really made my day. I hugged him and I told him as much as I was allowed-a very bland and vanilla version of life on deployment. He was very interested at the fact that I was already very advanced with my competences and had been already involved in combat and trauma medicine and honestly, it was fun to talk things through with him and get some pointers. I had worried that Major Gothi may be teaching me some weird bad habits but it was a relief that I was actually getting the best possible training which was aimed way above my supposed level.

He also offered me the chance to do some locums in the ED and I signed up to one to see how it went. I wasn't sure if I would stay in the army-in BERK-forever so it would be interesting to see how I worked in an NHS department. I promised to keep in touch and he hugged me before I headed out…but instead of heading home, I hit the library, launching an online search through the document archives of everything on Drago Bludvist.

Two hours later, I knew more about the man and his business operations than I had ever wanted. I had a sheaf of papers printed out from a variety of sources-business articles, the Financial Times, the tabloids and broadsheets, even gossip magazines…and Archeology Monthly. The man was obsessed with ancient Norse legends and myths and had made a number of generous gifts and bequests to various National Museums across Scandinavia…though this was counterbalanced by the rumours he had tried to buy some very precious and historic artefacts for his own personal collection. And, more interestingly, there were ugly rumours that articles hadn't been able to buy had just been…stolen…

Bludvist Industries was involved in a huge number of concerns across the Nordic world-geothermal power and fishing in his native Iceland, oil drilling in Norway and the Arctic, wood and paper, construction, farming, chemicals and even gemstones and rare earth metals. He was a multi-billionaire who probably owned an enormous debt from the Icelandic government meaning he could probably order them to do anything and who had fingers in every possible industry. And this powerful and vicious man had his eyes on the dragons of BERK. But why?

I had copied all the information to a memory stick anyway because I knew I wanted to analyse it myself later-but my instructions had specified paper copies only. So I packed up my things, logged off and headed back to my apartment.

When I got there, something felt off. The floor on the second floor outside my door was freshly grubby and as I checked, the door handle was too clean and shiny. Frowning, I fished the Trank gun I had checked out from BERK from my bag and clicked the safety off, before getting out my keys and opening the door. I paused-and them kicked it open.

What I was not expecting was a slight young man with strawberry blonde hair, bright blue eyes and freckles, standing at my kitchen counter and making two cups of coffee. I slammed the door closed, keeping him covered by my weapon and swiftly sweeping the main room for any other people. He quirked a smile and gestured to the mugs.

"How do you take it?" he asked, a soft Irish lilt warming his voice. I frowned and kept the muzzle pointed straight at him. Shrugging, he sloshed hot water onto the brown granules and then poured a generous helping of milk into both mugs before replacing it in the fridge. "I'll let you do your own sugar," he smiled and emerged. He was only my height, slight build and wore a black leather jacket, dark jeans, sneakers and T-shirt. "I think you're expecting me, Astrid," he said easily, grinning. "I'm Liam Voleur-Cami's brother."
Sixty Five: Return

With a click, I flipped the safety on and lowered my gun as I stared at 'Little' Liam, Cami's favourite brother.

"One sugar," I said firmly. His eyes widened. "In my coffee. One sugar." Then he flashed the same grin Cami had and scooped a huge heap of sugar in, whirled the spoon around and gestured.

"Glad you said that," he admitted and rested my best carving knife on the counter. "You can never be too careful-especially when dealing with him." I cocked an eyebrow and stuffed my gun back in my bag, then grabbed my coffee. It was too sweet because I actually don't take sugar-but those were the codewords Cami had left me and I trusted her. The letter had been very explicit and said that Liam would explain why she had gone-because he had gotten out. I carefully replaced my knife in the block and then gestured to the couch.

"I think you may need to explain," I suggested with a small smile and he nodded.

"Hey-have you got something for me?" he asked and I fished out the sheath of papers, handing them over. He sighed in relief. "My sis was very insistent," he admitted. "Sure, but she's a bit bossy, you know?" I smiled and sat carefully on the couch, sipping my coffee.

"A bit-but in a military environment, orders are given and you have to obey," I reminded him. Then I grinned. "But she does keep the boys in line-most of the time."

"She said you were a good friend," Liam admitted, his eyes pensive. "I've missed her since we… went." I frowned and stared at the young man. He was younger than Cami so he had to only be maybe fourteen or fifteen when they vanished, four years earlier.

"Are you able to tell me what happened? Or is it a Clan secret?" I asked, recalling Cami's infrequent tidbits on Clan culture. Liam shook his head, his pleasant open face shadowed.

"No," he admitted. "Though it has everything to do with the man you've researched for Cami." I put my cup down and gave him my full attention. "The Clan was travelling when we became aware that we were being tracked. Black vans following us wherever we went. Mam was getting worried- and then, at night, they came for us. They killed the dogs and captured everyone, burning the vans. Mam insisted she took the heirlooms but that was it. We were taken to a warehouse where we were held at gunpoint and then we were gassed and shipped elsewhere. It was cold and the land was black and rocky and…"

"Iceland," I realised. "You were taken to Iceland?" He nodded.

"Some big one-story building in the middle of a black lava field," he began and then saw me nodding. "You've seen it?"

"No-but my boyfriend has," I said. "And been here." Liam frowned and then his eyes widened.

"Been there... you mean the one-legged guy in black-the redhead?" he asked her and I stared and then nodded. Idly, I flipped my phone on and showed him the screensaver—a picture of Hiccup and I hugging. He nodded again.

"What happened there?" I demanded, my voice suddenly stern and he appeared shocked. "Hiccup
pretended to join the Hunters and ended up serving Drago Bludvist…but I know Drago treated him very badly…” Liam gave a wry smile.

"That's an understatement," he murmured. "Drago took the Clan to serve him. He kept Mam his hostage, threatening her and making us steal for him. Some were small things…items from private houses, personal collections or offices…but he also had us break into some museums and universities to collect specific items…books, papers…and some jewels. He's a cruel man…and he treats those creatures of his very badly…"


"Those of us who weren't deemed necessary for the thefts, were put to work looking after the dragons," he admitted. "I kind of liked them but the others-and Drago's men-were vile to them. They tried to train them by cruelty…but I always found they responded to kindness and trust." A smile tugged my lips then as I looked into his bright blue eyes, so similar to Cami's.

"Hiccup would get on well with you," I admitted and the young man chuckled.

"The Clan always get on well with dogs and horses and when they killed my Racer, I was missing having a pet…" My eyes widened and I stared at him, suddenly guessing what Cami would do.

"You stole one and got away!" I gasped as he flashed a brilliant smile.

"Drago kept Mammy captive and no matter what we tried, we couldn't get close," he admitted. "The others knew Drago's enforcer, Krogan, was watching her and would kill her without hesitation if there was any danger of her escaping. So they just accepted it and did what he wanted." He shrugged. "But I befriended Stealthy and Mammy knew. And when your boyfriend was forced to hack your system, Drago got the identity of all the Riders. We all knew he was mad because no one had anyone-except Cami. And he confronted Mammy and learned that Cami was one of ours. So the plan was to call her and get her to betray your people."

"Except Hiccup crashed Draco's systems and stole the female Night Fury," I interjected and Liam nodded.

"He bought you time-and the Drago changed the plan because he needed to harvest information from your computers before he ordered Cami to leave," he said. "We had no idea what he wanted but Mammy hatched a plan. I escaped with Stealthy and headed for the backstreets of Glasgow-so when Cami was summoned, she knew where to find me. She gave me her orders...to come here..." My eyes widened.

"Then where is Stealthy?" I asked and then frowned. "Erm...and what type of dragon is Stealthy anyway?" Liam gave a proud grin.

"She's a Changewing," he said and then sniggered at my alarm. "She's in the alley by the apartment block. I've coned it off and she's invisible. And she's a little diamond-well behaved and loyal as Hell!"

"And your means of getting those to Cami?" I asked and he grinned.

"Sure I'm not such a good rider as you or sis-but I get by because our people have always had a close affinity with horses and whatever we ride, we care for it," he said passionately. I smiled.

"You deserve to be in BERK," I told him and he stared and then smirked.

"All those rules really aren't for the likes of me," he told me plainly as I laughed at him.
"Cami adjusted and you could as well—because we have everything a dragon needs…including other dragons for company," I reminded him and he sighed, then finished his coffee. He agilely rose to his feet and checked the papers were safe inside his jacket before he turned and handed me something: Cami’s phone.

"Her code is 1007," he said. "She recorded you a message—she'll collect it when she comes back." I rose and then hugged him.

"I'll hold her to that," I said and then released him. "You be careful. One of his dragons controls others—so if you get too close, your Stealthy may not be yours any more…and you could end up back in his clutches." He flashed his confident grin.

"I'll be careful, Astrid," he said as I grabbed his hand on the way to the door.

"If you promise to take care, you can use this place as a refuge," I told him, gesturing to my beloved apartment. "Just tidy up after yourself, okay?" He nodded and his smile was genuinely grateful.

"I may just take you up on that," he smiled and let himself out. I closed and locked the door after him and then stared at the phone in my hand. Cami’s grin stared back at me, surrounded by the faces of her family and I sighed.

"I sincerely hope you have a plan, Cami—because Drago is a deadly enemy," I murmured. "And I hope the information I gave you can help get your family out…"

Thuggory realised he was in trouble when Snotlout yelled at him for doing exactly what he had been told to do and had then proceeded to complain about him to the rest of the Riders. The sergeant had insisted that Thuggory wear a badge marked 'PROBATIONARY RIDER' and as he stood beside Duskstrike, stroking the Nadder's flank absently, he realised Lieutenant Hofferson had been correct about Snotlout's teaching skills. He had only spoken briefly to Astrid but the woman had been definite in what it took to ride a Deadly Nadder.

Trust. You need trust, given and received. Nadders are very vain so compliment him all the time—because he’s beautiful anyway. Spend time with him, talking, laughing, playing…they actually can do ‘fetch’ really well. Like a huge almost avian dog! They love fish but I've found Stormfly actually adores chicken—so use it as a special treat. Listen to your dragon and learn to read his expressions. You need to know if he is unhappy, agitated or afraid and soothe him. Make him your friend. It takes time and it takes dedication but they are definitely worth it, Thuggory. Dragons are amazing.

"Are you listening to me, Rider?" Snotlout snapped. "What did I just say?"

"The opposite to what you said five minutes ago, Sergeant," Thuggory replied irritably. "You don't give consistent orders, you contradict yourself and you seem to think that yelling at your dragon will make the creature do what it doesn't want to."

"I'm an experienced rider and I taught Gustav everything he knows…" Snotlout began self-importantly as Thuggory folded his arms.

"Firstly, what Gustav knows could be written on the back of a beer mat without peeling the label off," he said sarcastically. "Second, you're a terrible teacher. And third—if this is all you know, then we are really in trouble." He looked around the other riders. "Who taught you to ride?" There was an embarrassed pause.
"Well, we figured some of it out ourselves but largely, Hiccup trained us," Fishlegs admitted.

"Not that we listened much," Eret added with a self-conscious shrug.

"Yeah-we really didn't listen," Tuff added.

"But he was very patient," Mulch explained. "He always thought up different exercises and ways of improving our skills and making us work as a team."

"I like him," Bucket, his simple older brother added. "He was kind to me."

"He was kind to us all," Fishlegs said firmly. "And he is our premier trainer."

"And out of action," Snotlout cut in with finality. "So the next best Rider will need to step up-and that's…"

"Astrid," Ruff said and everyone else nodded.

"But she's gone," Snotlout pointed out.

"Heather's way better than you," Gustav pointed out.

"Betrayed us and joined the enemy," Snotlout replied.

"Fishlegs is a good trainer…" Eret added and Snotlout turned to glare at him.

"Are you crazy? Fishface? I mean, no offence, Fish but you're…and I'm…"

"Which is why he's the best choice rather than you!" Eret pointed out with a definite smirk.

"But I'm the senior riding officer," Snotlout protested as Thuggory nodded to Duskstrike and the dragon gave a fierce roar. Everyone stared at him in shock.

"Face it," Thuggory growled. "I need Hiccup-but if he's missing, I need Astrid."

"But she's left on a leave of absence," Ruff pointed out. She had been hurt when Astrid left, though the other blonde had explained her reasons and asked the remaining female to keep an eye on the riders until she returned. Ruff had agreed though it had translated into simply watching the riders play up more than usual. The lieutenant rolled his eyes.

"In which case…I will need to speak to the General," he said. "I need training and you need someone in charge who knows what they're doing. We're getting her back."

I found working in the Emergency Department as a locum F1 (Foundation Year One Doctor) very different and pretty frustrating. I was definitely the bottom of the food chain and though it was a relief to use my skills to talk to people about spraining an ankle playing football or the fact their child had managed to stick a crayon in his ear, it was relatively boring and unchallenging. I was used to major trauma, life threatening poisons or mind-altering drugs and this was just…dull. It was also frustrating that I had to ask another person about everything. Major Gothi had already assessed my skills and knew what to delegate but, of course, they assumed I was a fresh out of Medical School wet-behind-the-ears baby doctor who needed helicopter parenting throughout my shift.

But I bit back my frustration and concentrated on working in the team, learning what I could about
non-BERK medicine. And it was only halfway through the shift that I realised the team was shocked at how confident and quick I was in assessing and dealing with patients and I smiled and eased up: I didn't have to work to Gothi's ferocious pace...though I didn't want to lose my edge. Instead, I persuaded the other team members to fill out assessment forms for my Foundation Programme so that by the time we were into the last hour of the shift, I had completed the requirement for about an entire rotation.

And then the phone rang and everyone went tense as the charge nurse took the call and we prepped for a major trauma arriving in five minutes. Instantly, my pulse accelerated and I sped with the team into Resus as we awaited the arrival of the casualty...or, as it turned out, casualties.
Immediately, I stood ready and as the second trauma was brought in, I looked up and saw uncertainty in the faces of the other junior doctors. And then I took control, firmly giving orders, deploying the team and leading the trauma, as I had done so many times in simulation as well as in real life back in BERK. Surprisingly, the team took their orders, worked as I asked and efficiently dealt with the primary survey and resuscitation before I checked with the senior. He was actually standing behind me, his face thoughtful as he watched me work and lead the team.

"You've done this before," he said. It wasn't a question. I nodded.

"Yes, sir," I replied respectfully. "Lots of experience with major traumas, gunshot wounds, burns, fractures, poisons..." His eyes widened and I smiled. "RAMC on deployment." He nodded thoughtfully.

"Normally, I wouldn't be happy that the most junior member of the team and a temporary employee steps in and takes charge but, to be honest, the way you led that team was better than most of my staff," he said honestly. "Kate?" The Charge nurse nodded.

"Oh, she was very clear, logical and decisive-and she followed the algorithm perfectly," she reported. "I like her." I blushed and he patted my shoulder.

"Well done, Astrid," he complimented me. "That was good work. Do you want to do the SBAR handover?" I grinned.

"It would be my pleasure," I said, "and...could I have CEX as well?" He smiled.

"It's a deal!" he promised as I turned back to the patient, checked his numbers and then prepared to hand him on to the critical care team.

But when I left the ED, my forms signed, scanned and submitted and all my assessments completed, I became aware that I was being followed. I tightened my hand around the strap of my rucksack and headed directly for the tram, trying to keep in the brightest lit areas but the steps closed and I bunched my fists, heading for a well-lit area where there was CCTV. And then I turned as the two dark-clad shapes closed. I remained still as I recognised one from the attack on the Base.

"It is her," the familiar man said, his ugly flattened face twisted in a leer. "Just as the Boss said. And someone will do anything to get her back..." My breathing accelerated because I knew they were talking about the Grimborns-and they wanted to entrap Hiccup. I stared at them.

"What makes you think you can grab me?" I breathed. They both leered.

"You're all alone and there's two of us," the other man said. "No dragons here..." He grabbed at me and I spun as I saw the flash of a knife and spun my backpack into the way, before the knife stabbed at me. I growled.
"That was my favourite bag!" I snapped and kicked him right in the midriff. He folded and staggered backwards as the other man scowled.

"So that's how you want it, bitch?" he threatened.

"You tried to stab me!" I pointed out, backing away. He began to chuckle as I stared at him.

"Just surrender, girlie," he sneered. "The big Boss wanted leverage over Hiccup Haddock and you are that pawn. He'll do anything for his girl…"

"So you know he's still alive," I growled. "Then Cami will have told you that I will do anything for him." I smiled, then dragged my Trank gun out and shot the pair of them.

There was a moment before I realised what I had done. I had used a weapon…for which I had a valid license and authority…and taken out two of Drago's men. Then I wondered what I was going to do with them, until a nasty thought struck me. Pausing only to formulate my story, I summoned security. What I had planned would mean that Drago's men would have immense difficulty in getting out and back to their evil master any time soon…

oOo

I had done three more shifts in the ED and really completed everything I needed from a placement already, including a small audit as well as making a little extra cash which I used to pick up some things for BERK. I had almost finishing packing what I needed for my new home…but there was a problem. Something was just inhibiting me…and I realised what it was: no one had called. Or emailed. Or…anything.

I sighed and idly flipped open my laptop, which I had brought with me, and then I had emailed Stoick Haddock with everything I had got from Cami's brother. It wasn't that I didn't trust General Zakhysnyk: I just didn't really know her enough to make a judgement, whereas, I knew Stoick Haddock and though I knew he had issues with the loss of his wife and brother and how terribly he had treated Hiccup, I also knew he was the most invested in dealing with Drago. So I told him everything including the observations I had made and Hiccup had told me…and the fact two of Drago's men were currently locked up as escaped mental patients in the secure unit. He had chuckled at that and promised to spirit them away to a more secure location…though he had been concerned for my safety. No one should know where I was…except Drago's man had hacked the base and I wondered if anything was safe. I promised to let him know what they had been after…once I found out for myself.

I was relaxing in my apartment an evening after a shift, a run and a nice warm shower and was contemplating when I would go back when there was a knock on the door. Groaning, I checked the small discreet security cameras I had fitted in the landing and outside my door and spied three shapes I certainly wasn't expecting…but which were very familiar. Still wary, I raised my Trank gun and then covered the door as I undid the bolts and double mortis locks and pulled it open.

"Good evening, Lieutenant," General Zakhysnyk said calmly, walking into my apartment uninvited. I stared at her and reluctantly lowered my gun as the twins scamped in after her, pushing and shoving and then stopping to gaze at my apartment in what I hoped was awe. Ruff stared at me.

"Wow-great pad," she complimented me as her brother threw himself onto the couch and evicted a handful of cushions.

"I'm moving in here," Tuff sighed happily.
"Over your dead body," I reminded him dryly. "The only person moving in here with me is Hiccup." And then my face dropped. "I guess he's still unconscious." Idly examining my collection of books, the female twin nodded.

"I would've called you the moment he woke," she admitted softly and then she shrugged. "Everyone keeps cheerful but we're not. It's not the same without you…or Captain Dragon Boy."

"I thought it was Commander," Tuff pointed out, grabbing the remote and flicking through my satellite channels. The General folded her arms, unamused.

"I appreciate you needed time to yourself, Lieutenant—but I need you back in the Base," she told me firmly. "You are the senior Riding officer…" I inspected her with a tilt of my head and a cynical look.

"With all due respect—I thought that was Snotlout," I retorted. She sighed.

"It is apparent Sergeant Jorgensen is not equipped for that post," she admitted. "His report contained the word 'awesome' on no less that twenty three occasions along with 'evil dude', 'yak dung' and my particular favourite, 'mutton head'." She was wincing as she spoke and I could almost-feel sympathy for a very efficient and totally conventional officer who found herself suddenly dealing with Snotlout and the twins. In fact, I wondered why she had brought them along.

"I did suggest the word 'awesome' was less than appropriate," I pointed out and she graced me with a thin smile.

"Precisely the reason why you are far more suited than he is to the task," she pointed out. "And also…to training Lieutenant Thyssen. You have the same make of dragon…"

"I believe they are referred to as 'breed' or 'species'," I commented and she flicked me an irritated look.

"Same dragon so you are the person best suited to instructing him…"

"Until Hiccup awakes," I added. She nodded.

"And you have seniority over Lieutenant Thyssen," she admitted. "His report detailed the effective and efficient steps you took to resolve the issue of our entombment and the dragon escape—you and Specialist Haddock both." She paused, her lips pursed and I could tell from the look in her green eyes that she was fighting a battle with herself. "I was wrong," she finally said. "You and Specialist Haddock are the most suited to lead the Riders."

"Finally," Tuff sighed from the couch, thumbing his way down the Netflix menu. Ruff offered me a hand and I smiled and high-fived her.

"Thank you, Ma'am," I replied formally. There was a pause.

"I would like you to come back," she added. "Please."

"Pleeeeeease," Ruff whined and dropped to her knees. "It's so dull, I'm the only girl left, Snotlout is a complete ass and Gustav is going to get fed to the insane Changewing if he doesn't stop trying to outprank Tuff!"

"I will of course need to resolve the issue of Specialist Haddock's rank…though General Haddock's solution would seem to be the most appropriate," she admitted.
"Commander Dragon Boy it is," I smiled smugly. The General managed a small smile.

"When he wakes, you may tell him that his rank is restored and we will need to arrange to meet up and discuss the direction and priorities for the Riders over the next six months," she added formally. I stared at her.

"I can tell you those already, Ma'am," I said firmly. "We have to find out what Drago Bludvist is up to and stop him. He is behind the most recent attack and his men attacked me outside my work here." Her eyebrows flew up.

"Then where…?" she asked and I smirked.

"I had security take them away as psychotic," I grinned. "Talking about dragons and someone called Drago? It will taken them ages to convince anyone they are sane…even if Drago comes through for them. But I suspect he'll leave them as inconvenience." Then my voice hardened. "He has Cami-Specialist Voleur-and I have intelligence for you." The General sighed.

"I have some for you as well," she admitted and her voice was grim. "Drago Bludvist has contacted BERK HQ and is claiming the dragons are unsafe here. He is requesting they are handed over to his safe facility in Akureyri…"

"Where they will become weapons," I told her. "He's weaponised Scauldron venom, Dragon Root and the Dragon-Ear plant already…who knows what he will do when he gets them all?" I took a deep breath. "I can't allow it. Hiccup wouldn't allow it. So we have to stop him."

"About time," Tuff grumbled from the couch. "Have I got time to binge-watch four series of Dexter?" I walked over and took the remote from him.

"No," I told him firmly. "You and Ruff can help take my things to your car. If Drago wants our dragons, we have to stop him-by any means we have. I'm coming back to BERK."

Hiccup remained in a coma as I returned, his numbers now normal but showing no signs of wakefulness. Major Gothi reported they had put him through CT, MRI and PET scans to check for any damage but everything seemed fine. The anti-venom mixture had worked except for one thing: he remained unconscious. He was now breathing for himself with just an oxygen mask, they were feeding him through a nasogastric tube and he had a single drip giving him essential fluids. His hands looked much better, the skin pink and soft, like a mere first degree burn, not like the mess the Changewing Acid had made of him and I was astonished but proud of what Toothless's saliva had achieved. Likewise, his stump was almost healed, the wounds closed and clean and I just wished that he would open his emerald eyes and smile and treat me to some of his Hiccup sass.

But days turned into nights and back to days and he remained unconscious and I wondered if the venom had wrought some horrific harm we were unaware of. Maybe they had modified the toxin to attack the wakefulness centres in the brainstem, destroying neurones essential to consciousness. Maybe Viggo's 'present' meant he would never wake again and remain forever trapped in this twilight existence between life and death. My only hope was that his EEG showed signs of alpha wave activity, signs of dreams…and I had to take that as a sign that if his conscious level could lighten enough to allow him to dream, then it could elevate to the point of consciousness once more.

I had been back for four days and Stoick Haddock had contacted me that he was stalling and had discussed Drago's request with the Director of BERK…but the man was minded to acquiesce. He
needed someone from BERK-a rider-to explain why the dragons needed to remain in our extremely expensive isolated base when someone was volunteering to do it and pick up the tab. I rolled my eyes but that was administrator thinking: General Haddock and I both thought like soldiers and knew you never hand your best weapon over to the enemy. In addition, the report on what Drago's agent had snatched from our systems had been tendered to the General by Will but I hadn't been told the contents. Apparently it was secret-so I promised myself I would corner Will and make him tell me exactly what was going on-because Hiccup, Stoick and I would need to know. We had to keep them safe.

I had spent some time with Stormfly, who was healing but seemed down because she still couldn't fly, and Toothless, who was missing Hiccup horribly. Since he had been admitted, the dragon hadn't been allowed into the Infirmary and he was getting depressed at being separated from his beloved Rider. I had flown them both and seen and fussed little Myrkr too, but there was the yawning sense of something missing: the goofy and calm presence of my fiancé. And though I was now sitting at his side, his hand in mine, he seemed to be oceans away. Then I sighed, sitting back in the seat and thumbing through my phone for some music to cheer myself up. I'm not the most hip and up to date where music is concerned-I freely admit that-but one song caught my eye and I clicked it on, knowing the lyrics were just so apt for Hiccup and I. Then I took Hiccup's hand and sat back, closing my eyes as the voices of George Michael and then Elton John wafted around us.

I laced my fingers with Hiccup's and sighed, allowing myself to feel the words. Finally, I joined in the final chorus...though I modified the lyrics just for us...as I always did when I heard it since we'd been together...

"Don't let the sun go down on me;
although I search myself, it's always you that I see,
I'd just allow a fragment of our life to wander free;
but losing you, my babe, is like the sun going down on me..."

There were tears on my face and I closed my eyes...

...as I felt his fingers curl around mine and squeeze my hand. My eyes slammed open and I sat up all in one motion, staring at his hand clamped tightly around mine-as his eyes fluttered and finally, tiredly opened. The emerald depths were grateful and filled with his love and my face was wet at the sight of his beautiful gaze once more. His lips twitched into the faintest hint of a smile.

"Never...leaving...you...Milady," Hiccup said.

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A/N 'Don't let the sun go down on me' was written by Elton John with lyrics by Bernie Taupin. Apologies for the modified lyrics but I'm sure I'm not the only one who does that! If you listen to it, there are an awful lot of the lyrics that could apply to this version of Hiccup and Astrid-hp.
Sixty Six: Journey to the Centre of BERK.

I had needed to hold the com a long way from my ear when I gave the team the news that Hiccup had woken and his tired face had folded into a grin at the delight they had expressed at the news. There were yells and shouts and he had the cheek to ask me if I had tried kissing him to wake him from his coma. I had blushed and admitted I had only kissed his forehead. He had smiled indulgently at me.

"I seem to recall someone telling me it was 'lips all the way'," he reminded me.

"Shut up, Dragon Boy," I grumbled gently and he smiled.

"Been quiet for far too long," he admitted as I had helped him sit up a little. Warily, he had run his hand over his face and grimaced: he almost had a scrappy beard and he groaned. "I need a shave," he added.

"Oh, we can sort that out," I promised as I slid onto the bed by him. "Not really a beard person…"

"Thank Thor," he smiled. "Must be why you never ran away with the more successful Haddock…"

I stared at him and then pulled a face.

"Bleurgh," I told him definitely. "You're the only Haddock for me. Honestly…it's those green eyes…" He smirked and then the smile fell from his face.

"I thought I heard him," he said quietly. "He was…apologising. He said he was proud of me. It must have been a dream…" I gently stroked his cheek: he had lost weight and his jaw and cheek bones were much sharper but the familiar messy auburn hair framed his worried face and I knew it would be no chore to help him recover.

"He was here," I told him gently. "Gobber told me. He came to see his only son…and apologise." He stared at me. "I called him, when we thought we were losing you. I thought he deserved to know." He stared at me, his eyes wide with shock…and then gratitude.

"He came?" he asked me softly and I nodded.

"He's your Dad," I reminded him. "And he has been making progress, I think. Gobber saw him when he came…because I had something I needed to do for Cami." He sighed.

"I can never thank you enough," he murmured. "I heard him. I-I tried to reach out for him. And then I just went back to sleep. But he came here for me…" He sighed. "I love you, Astrid," he told me gently.

"I love you too, you doofus," I assured him. "And we're going to get Gothi to check you out and discharge you to my care so I can get you back to the handsome, brilliant, caring man I adore. But first…you owe me a hug, Dragon Boy." His arms wrapped around me and he pulled me close, staring carefully into my eyes.

"I was floating," he murmured softly. "It was black and warm and like being lost in the dark…until I heard you singing. And I fought hard with all my might to get to you, to be with you once more. Don't leave me alone in the dark, Astrid." I leaned in and kissed him tenderly, feeling him lean into the kiss.
"Oh, I am never leaving you, Hiccup," I assured him, resting my head on his shoulder. He leaned back on his pillows and snuggled into me.

"Better not," he mumbled against my neck. "Otherwise I'd end up with Snot as my sidekick and I would have to let Toothless eat him..." I smiled and closed my eyes, snuggled against him.

"That's my Dragon Boy."

He was released from the Infirmary the next day and though he had a spare prosthetic which he was stubbornly wearing and a pair of arm crutches, I was wheeling him along in a wheelchair-which he was hating-because I wanted to get him to see Toothless as soon as possible. The Night Fury was grumpy, depressed and not eating and he needed his Rider. And Hiccup was frantic to see his beloved dragon once more-so it felt like a personal triumph as we wheeled into Pen One, the other Riders all there standing a guard of honour as he levered himself up to his feet, the crutches used to support him as the dragon saw him and galloped towards him.

He was laughing as he was knocked to the ground, his dragon licking him frantically. the smaller grey shape of Myrkr bounded forward, her pink burns almost healed and she joined in the concerted licking attack on Hiccup. He groaned and then tried to push them off-but Toothless was too excited at finally having his beloved Rider back. The Riders were laughing and whooping and Thuggory was watching, open-mouthed, as we laughed and joked with our friend. I think he had no idea how close we could be as a group and how fond we all were of our leader. Finally, after watching him get smothered with Night Fury saliva—probably not the worst thing considering his propensity for getting injured and it's apparent healing properties—I walked forward, pushed the dragons back and hauled my soaking and sticky fiancé to his feet.

Immediately, he wrapped his arms around me and I pulled a face, feeling the sticky gloop adhere to my top. His hand gently stroked my cheek and I stared up into his eyes, seeing the same joy I had witnessed so many times when he was with his dragon.

"Thank you, Milady," he murmured, then leaned forward and kissed me. There were whoops, gagging noises and calls of 'Get a room!' which we ignored. I threaded my hands through his hair and stared into the smouldering emerald eyes.

"Actually, getting a room seems like a good idea," I murmured, enjoying the self-conscious blush that ignited in his cheeks. He nuzzled me.

"Though maybe we ought to catch up first?" he murmured. I sighed.

"I hate it when you're responsible," I muttered. "Okay-everyone meet at our room at seven. Bring drinks. And no Tuff-no dragons. I know you've had Smidvarg in your room but NO DRAGONS!" Thuggory stared at me as did the male twin.

"Unbelievable," he protested. "She's been off the Base! How did she ever find out?" I smirked and saw Thuggory shaking his head.

"What am I, Tuff?" I asked him directly and he huffed.

"Lieutenant Astrid 'Don't mess the fuck with me' Hofferson," he sighed. "Okay, I'll put him back in the pens while we're over."

"ALL THE TIME!" I snapped.
"But I'm training him!" Tuff protested as Ruff rolled her eyes.

"He doesn't nest in your drawers, though-he does in MINE!" she retorted. His eyes widened.

"You turned me in? TRAITOR!" he yelled and leapt on her and in seconds, there were fists flying and curses sounding. Toothless made a laughing warble and Myrkr tilted her head in surprise. Eret and Snotlout shared a glance before separating the twins and hauling them apart, still clawing at one another and calling each other incredibly childish insults. Hiccup sighed and then pulled away from me.

"Dragon dung duty-NOW!" he snapped. Tuff cast him a betrayed look.

"And to think I snatched your flower and smuggled it out in my pants!" he said in an offended tone. Hiccup stared at him then at me and pulled a face.

"Bleurgh. I really don't want to know," he said firmly. "Okay, gang-back to duty. I guess none of you are doing any exercises so standard set by three. Eret-please get Thuggory sitting on Duskspine and getting the dragon used to his weight and position. Thuggory-no flying without me and Toothless there. All clear?" There was a pause and everyone murmured 'Yes, Hiccup," in that monotonous voice kids use when they've been misbehaving and the teacher catches them. He nodded once and grabbed my hand, allowing me to manoeuvre him into the wheelchair once more.

"You okay?" I murmured as he held me tightly. He nodded.

"My leg is really killing me and I can still barely put any weight onto it but we need to speak with the General before we brief the team," he told me.

"Briefing involving pizza and snacks," I added. He smiled as he lowered himself into the chair. He really was fiercely independent but he recognised there was no chance after his illness and injuries that he could manage the mile long walk through the tunnels from Pen One back to the Base.

"If you know your team, you can handle them the right way," he admitted. "They work best with food and drink and a relaxed environment." I smiled and nodded to Thuggory.

"My room, seven," I reminded him and his eyes widened.

"Um…I thought…" he began and I sighed.

"You're a Rider now so you are part of the team," I reminded him. "Though Thor alone knows how we'll fit you all in…" He straightened up and a small smile lit his face.

"I'll be there, Ma'am…sir…" he said to us and Hiccup's eyes widened.

"So…no longer our god, eh?" he teased the other man and Thuggory rolled his eyes.

"That lasted about half an hour," he admitted.

"Try half a minute," I muttered. He ignored me and continued talking to Hiccup.

"You know the team…I just know the army." Hiccup offered him his hand.

"Then I'm happy to have your help," he said genuinely. "I'm not army, not military at all…and though I have Astrid at my side, I don't want her to be burdened with all the military stuff when she also needs to spend time with Major Gothi getting her training done." I grinned and Thuggory scowled at me.
"You mean you want me to do the reports and the personnel evaluations," he realised and I grinned.

"Bingo!" I laughed. "But don't worry-I did them all recently so you should be okay for a few weeks..." And we were still laughing at his chagrin as we headed back to the base and the General's rooms. The trip was largely silent because he was thinking but as we arrived, he carefully levered himself up onto his crutches and insisted on walking into the office when we knocked, his face set and determined. The General got to her feet in shock and stared at him as he stood before her with me at his side. I saluted and stood to attention while he nodded.

"General," he said calmly. "Thank you for restoring my rank...such as it is..." Her eyes narrowed but he wasn't being sarcastic for once, his concentration locked on keeping vertical. "I believe we need to talk." Eyes drifting to me, she nodded.

"I take it Lieutenant Hofferson has filled you in on the latest developments while you were unconscious?" she said briskly and he grimaced.

"Some," he admitted, "Though I suspect she doesn't approve of me worrying about it so she may have been...a little superficial with some details."

"So you know Drago Bludvist has lobbied BERK HQ and the Council to have the dragons turned over to him 'for safe keeping'?" she checked and he nodded, shuffling his feet. She gestured to the two chairs before her desk and we sat as he nodded.

"Safe for who? he asked rhetorically. "We all know that he's the main danger to our unit..."

"I suspect the Council don't," Zakhysnyk said calmly. "He is very good at playing the benefactor, the philanthropist, the businessman..."

"The sadistic psychopath and murderer," Hiccup added grimly. "When are they meeting to discuss this?" The General inspected him closely: he was still pale and weary, dark shadows under his brilliant eyes and he was still unsteady on his feet.

"Two days," she revealed.

"I want in," he replied without hesitation. "I have some very interesting 'Show and Tell' I can present that would make them reconsider." She stared at him, unused to his determination where dragons are concerned. "Look-I've seen how he treats his dragons," he explained heavily. "Myrkr's broken wing and wounds were courtesy of his 'compassionate' handlers. And we know what his endgame is..."

"Do we?" the general asked pointedly and he paused.

"Control of dragons and their use as weapons in achieving his ultimate aim...which, admittedly, is less obvious at present..." he continued and then he smiled. "But I think we have someone on the inside now." The General stared at him and he smiled. "Cami...Specialist Voleur. She wouldn't have sent her brother to speak to Astrid if she didn't have a plan and wasn't planning on helping the team. Look-this man captured her family and held them against their will for four years. They blackmailed her to coming with a threat to the life of her mother, the Clan Matriarch...why wouldn't she want to stop whatever he wants as vengeance?"

"We know he uses his power and influence to further his aims," I added. "He was in Birmingham when he captured Hiccup." My face hardened. "He used dragons to attack a civilian target with no thought for collateral damage."
"I thought that Dagur, Savage and Vorg were involved with the dragons they stole from BERK," the General asked.

"Yes, they were—but there were others as well-including species we have never had at BERK and some riders who were never ours," Hiccup pointed out. "Those were Drago's...on a practice run, as far as I can see. It was a trap but also a dry run for an attack on a civilian conurbation...though I have no clue where. We know he has been using Cami's family to steal artefacts he was unable to purchase from private collections, universities and museums...and we know that he is abnormally interested in ancient documents on dragons and their control." He sighed. "He bombarded me with questions while I was his 'employee'...and he was incredibly interested in what was there in the Icelandic National Archives, which his men had never been able to translate or read." He paused.

"I know that look," I murmured. He glanced up at me with a broad grin.

"Have you ever been to Iceland?" he asked me cheerfully.

"Same as you," I reminded him. "But not properly..."

"I think we should pay a visit...as tourists..." he murmured. "After we stop him having our dragons handed over..." The General stared at him.

"You have some very definite ideas, Hiccup Haddock," she told him slowly. "I will book you on the flight to Brussels tomorrow evening. You too, Lieutenant. I think I will need your assistance in preventing a major mistake being made." I stared at her and smiled.

"General, it would be my pleasure," I said.

OoO

Of course, it wasn't that simple—because, as it turned out, Hiccup didn't actually have a passport. General Haddock, in his wisdom and general neglect for his son, had put the boy in a military transport and shipped him into the UK just like a piece of freight, meaning he was—technically—an illegal alien. So we spent the next day down at Grosvenor Square in London at the US Embassy, getting him a US passport and then on to a quick trip along to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office arranged by the Director of BERK where he was granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK. Only then could he be confirmed on his flight and leave the country.

He had borne up well under the embarrassment because I was there with him, suited and booted in my smart uniform with my dress uniform packed in a neat case. General Zakhysnyk had issued him with an official uniform for BERK and he had explored it with some trepidation, finding a dark green uniform not dissimilar to his father's US Army uniform which had made him feel even more self-conscious. I eyed him up and smiled as he tried it on.

"Hmm...I have a feeling that will definitely be your colour, Dragon Boy," I told him smugly and he rolled his eyes.

"NOT growing the beard to match," he told me sarcastically and I brushed some imaginary lint off his shoulder. He had Naval Commander rank flashes in gold and over his left breast was a golden insignia in the shape of a dragon, wings unfurled and tail curled towards its body.

"Bleurgh!" I smirked and he leaned forward and kissed me.

"You do realise that technically, I outrank you?" he murmured. I smiled.

"Then what are your orders, sir?" I asked him in a sultry voice. His hands slid down my sides and
landed warmly around my waist.

"I am sure I can think of something, Lieutenant," he whispered in my ear.

"Yessir!" I grinned.

We landed in Brussels Airport on the Heathrow flight just after eight and flew easily through customs, though there was a short delay as they inspected Hiccup's brand shiny new passport carefully before he was stamped through. He was still on crutches so had been given priority boarding and disembarkation-and I went with him. Our bags were priority as well so we made our way through to our waiting official car while the rest of the passengers from our flight were still crowding round the baggage carousel.

Hiccup carefully placed his computer bag on the seat beside him and stowed his crutches so I could snuggle beside him as we sailed through Brussels, the street lights illuminating a pretty city that I would have liked to explore more if we hadn't been here to stop Drago stealing our dragons. Hiccup's head moved as he scanned the road ahead and then he sighed.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked him and he nodded.

"Not looking forward to it," he managed. "After all, I will be seeing my Dad again…and then Drago. And though you told me Dad apologised, I am still going to have an awkward conversation to go through."

"Better to have the option than not," I reminded him and his hand squeezed mine.

"Sorry. Selfish," he admitted quietly, recalling my parents were both dead. I squeezed back.

"Not selfish, just…complicated," I said, absolving him of all blame. "But we need to concentrate-and you need some rest this evening!" He quirked me a smile, his emerald eyes glittering.

"Hmm-we're on holiday in romantic Brussels, Milady-getting some rest was the last thing on my mind," he teased me. I leaned over and kissed him.

"You're incorrigible," I told him.

"Insatiable," he smiled.

"Insufferable," I retorted.

"Irresistible?" he suggested hopefully.

"In your dreams," I smirked. "But maybe in luck…we'll see." He sat back with a smile.

"A man can dream," he said softly. I leaned against him.

"And sometimes, Dragon Boy, your dreams can come true."

oOo

B.E.R.K. Headquarters was a large glass and steel building to the south of the city centre, guarded by the local police and soldiers because it could potentially be a terrorist target and our IDs were checked very thoroughly when we arrived. Finally, we were waved into the underground car park and were met by General Zakhysnyk and-more surprisingly-General Haddock. Hiccup's eyes widened but as he emerged from the car, he pulled his cap on and threw a relatively impressive salute. I gave a better salute and the Generals returned it, before Zakhysnyk waved us to stand at
"Drago is already here," she said without preamble. "He has already spoken with half of the Council but the Director has refused to meet him prior to the official audience." Hiccup frowned.

"Security here is very tight," he commented. "You know that he is linked with terrorist activities, Dad." Stoick's eyes widened, for Hiccup was treating him as if nothing had happened. "So how has he passed through security when we were checked out like enemies of the state?"

"Money buys many things, son," he said gruffly. "Respectability is one-and ears is another. People will listen to a rich man saying nonsense or spouting offensive opinions because he is rich while the wise poor man is invisible and inaudible." Hiccup grabbed his computer bag and gave his lopsided smile.

"Then let's render this rich psychopath voiceless," he said.

He was handy on his crutches-I may have mentioned it before-and he managed to make it look almost effortless as he swung through, into the elevator and up to conference level two. We were ID-checked again and then we entered a bland magnolia-painted corridor with grey carpet and grey painted doors. The Generals led the way along the corridor until we reached a larger office marked with the plaque: J HANDLER, DIRECTOR OF B. E. R. K.

General Zakhysnyk knocked and we were admitted immediately, entering a wide pale cream office with a traditional cherrywood desk with the BERK crest six foot high on the wall behind him. Director Johann Handler was a smallish man maybe my height with a pair of cool eyes, greying dark hair and a neat beard. His pointed nose dominated a generally amiable face but I could tell he was a professional politician, a man used to weighing up options and arriving at the most expedient-though not necessarily the right-answer. We all saluted and he smiled, waving away the greetings.

"Please take a seat," he invited us cheerfully. "I am honoured: the former and current Commanders of BERK and two of their senior riders." The Generals sat and I complied as well but Hiccup paused and removed his cap, adjusting his crutches so he could offer the man his hand.

"Director," he said calmly. "I am Hiccup Haddock, Rider of Toothless the Night Fury and Leader of the Dragon Riders." He paused until Director Handler grasped his hand and shook it before he continued. "As you can see, I am still recovering from the aftereffects of my captivity with Drago and his allies, the Grimborns. But I am here to prevent you making a catastrophic mistake."

The Director's smile grew slightly strained as he gestured for Hiccup to sit and he returned to his own, very padded leather seat behind the desk and activated a bank of screens behind him, each showing a member of the Council of BERK.

"I appreciate your candour, Commander Haddock," he said amiably. "My forbears were traders, businessmen and we travelled far and wide to deal with all. Drago Bludvist is a man who appreciates our work and who has already generously contributed…I would be interested how you substantiate these allegations." Hiccup smiled.

"Why do I need to?" he asked simply. "I am a member of the organisation while he is a man with indisputable links to terrorist activities, a man who is responsible for the murder of a young woman and a man who abuses and threatens dragons."

"Those are lies!" The familiar dark booming voice of Bludvist sounded in the room as the man walked in. I had only briefly seen him in real life when we were trapped in Birmingham-though I
knew Hiccup had spent some quality time with him and I saw him tense and go rigid for a moment. He had been seated that time but now, I could see he was almost as tall as Stoick Haddock and as massive, his powerful frame sheathed incongruously in an obviously bespoke and extremely expensive charcoal grey silk suit. Interestingly, his left arm hung limp from his shoulder and I narrowed my eyes, trying to work out his injury.

"Really? And why would I lie when you tried to kill me as well? Twice?" Hiccup's voice was calm but I could hear the edge in his tone and knew he was finding it difficult. Then he flipped his laptop open and logged into the BERK system. He glanced up at Drago and deliberately slapped ENTER.

The footage from his com when he was held prisoner by Drago's men and the man was displayed on all screens, showing to all the Council members. I saw their faces short in shock and the Billionaire growl in fury. Especially when Hiccup changed the image to what I realised was my own helmet footage from Birmingham-casually recorded as ASTRIDCAM-that betrayed his complicity with a traitor and an enemy of BERK. Then the footage changed to Hiccup's com and suit recorders that displayed his encounters with the man in Akureyri-starting with the Arena and the small grey shape of Myrkr. The shape of Drago loomed before Hiccup.

"They were kicking her," Hiccup's voice murmured but Drago's face creased into an impatient glare.

"The animal must be disciplined to learn," he growled, his tone remorseless but the young Rider shifted position.

"Dragons respond best to trust," he argued.

"And they also learn from fear!" Drago roared, his entire face twisting in rage, his hand swinging round and catching the young Rider hard across the cheek. The sound of the slap echoed as the whole image jerked from the ferocious impact. The sound was still reverberating through the arena as he swung again-and Hiccup caught the thick wrist with difficulty.

"But I'm a slow learner," he said through his teeth. "Tell your men to back off when I'm training... or you can train your own damned Night Fury!" With a roar, Drago lunged forward, his hand closing around Hiccup's slender throat and the camera jerked.

"You swore a DEAL!" Drago shouted in his face

The images moved to Drago's office in his stronghold in Iceland, rehearsing the conversation that Hiccup recalled clearly-and which still nauseated him. The date and time stamp was recorded in the corner as well as the GPS location and the tag HICCUPCAM.

"I want...BERK..." Drago insisted.

"Yeah, yeah, join the queue," Hiccup had sighed under his breath. Drago scowled and had obviously heard his sarcastic reply.

"I am disappointed in your attitude," Bludvist menaced him gruffly. "I will see if Ryker can alter that. After all, you are my employee...even if you imagine yourself freelance." Hiccup's camera stilled, then moved to show him lazily tap in a command. The BERK system waited.

"I think Ryker will do what Viggo commands-and they have given me their protection," he said as calmly as he could manage, the quaver in his voice obvious over the recording. "You want my skills, Drago. My attitude is my own business." His breath hitched as there was an impact on his
"Prove it," the industrialist said calmly. "Destroy BERK." Hiccup quietly interrogated the computer, his eyes focusing on the screen and probing the edges of the system. His skills were obvious as commands flashed across the screen.

"They've revoked my codes," he tried, craning his neck to look up at the brooding shape of Drago. "And modified the firewall. I...I can't..." Bludvist growled.

"Viggo said you were the man who built the BERK system," he threatened. "Maybe you don't understand what I am asking. I want to tear down the system...and if you can't do it, then something has to suffer." Hiccup stiffened. "You seem fond of the baby Night Fury. It would be a shame if she were to lose...a wing..."

"And that demonstrates why this man cannot be allowed to take the dragons," Hiccup said, straightening up and defiantly facing Drago. "He abuses and threatens to maim and destroy the dragons on a whim, he consorts with traitors and is actively trying to penetrate and destroy BERK." He looked up and glanced at Director Handler, who was looking shocked and the Council-who were unanimously voting NO. Johann steepled his fingers as he sat forward.

"Hmm...I regret to report that your offer has been unanimously rejected, Mr Bludvist," he said apologetically. "And I feel we really must ask you to leave..."

"NO!" Drago roared, snatching a gun from his pocket and firing...
Sixty-Seven: BERK's Most Wanted.

Time slowed—which I know is a mental construct not a real thing—but I could see every detail as if it was happening in super slow-mo. As soon as Bludvist reached for his pocket, Hiccup snatched his computer and used it to slap me backwards, throwing me out of the line of fire as the gun was snatched and raised by his right hand. Drago Bludvist was a huge, menacing man, his hooked nose casting shadows over his sallow, scarred face, the skin having an unhealthy sheen. Stoick was already shoving Director Handler out of the line of fire and General Zakhysnyk dived behind the desk as the reports of the shots echoed round the office. The Council were shocked and split between haranguing the man and contacting security but in that moment, Drago shot Hiccup four times in the chest.

I was rolling as I hit the ground, my hand snaking into the computer bag and snatching the Trank gun we had brought which had been cleared by security. As I rolled, I shot Drago three times—but he backed up laughing, the darts unable to penetrate his suit…which I realised, with horror, was made from dragon skin. Growling, I snatched the chair and swung it round, hitting Drago full in the face.

That got his attention and as he was stunned, the door swung open. Without hesitation, Drago shot them and rushed forward, a cloak—who wears a cloak nowadays?-swinging behind him as he slammed two heavy duty glass vials onto the ground—and green smoke billowed out. Another guard burst in and raised his gun.

"DON'T SHOOT!" I yelled, realising we were surrounded by a cloud of Zippleback gas. "It's explos…"

Drago's cloak whipped up as the hapless guard fired, completely ignoring me—and the idiot was propelled across the room by the resulting blast. We had all dived for the floor and I curled over Hiccup, my hands over my ears. Throwing more vials ahead of him, he gave us one last sneer of contempt.

"Then see how well you do without me!" he taunted us and rushed away. The smoke billowed in the outer office and the staccato sounds of gunfire suggested that Drago had travelled with friends. While the obvious question—how did they get weapons in here?-rolled around my head, I was more concerned about my fiancé and I peered down into his face as his eyes snapped open and he groaned, a hand rising to press against his chest.

"And you wanted to hand our dragons over to him?" he asked pointedly, slowly sitting up. The Generals and Director Handler stared at him in shock as I rested a cautious hand on his shoulder.

"Babe?" I asked and he grimaced, slowly unfastening his uniform coat and shirt—to reveal his flight suit underneath.

"Even though these are pretty bulletproof, it still feels like you've been kicked by a mule when a round hits at point blank range," he complained, grimacing. "Are you alright, Astrid?" I nodded.

"Son—are you…?" Stoick asked, his voice unmistakably concerned. Looking up with a small smile, Hiccup shook his head ruefully.

"Just a bit bruised, Dad…sir…" he reassured him. The Director popped up from behind the desk
and stared at us as I righted the chair and helped Hiccup to sit in it.

"But how…?" he asked, his voice puzzled.

"I've seen him," he admitted. "And boy, does he not like to lose. He really hates being crossed and responds violently…" He paused and my hand rested briefly on his shoulder. He cast me a grateful look. "But the more pertinent question is-how was he allowed to bring weapons into BERK? In fact, why was he allowed here at all? Even the most cursory of looks on the internet shows that his connections are very suspect, his actions—even those he admits to—are ruthless and probably criminal and he is certainly the last person who should be allowed anywhere near a top secret multinational organisation!"

The Director sat down.

"That is evident now yes," he admitted. "It seems his bank balance seems to have purchased him more access than should have been possible. But how was he impervious to your gun, Lieutenant?" His eyes turned on me and I stared back.

"Dragon skin suit and cloak, sir," I told him brusquely, my tone making clear what I thought of that. "They are pretty bulletproof-unless you use armour-piercing rounds. He came prepared for rejection…and had his men in place."

"And the gas…?"

"Zippleback gas-highly explosive," I added. "Had the guard followed a direct order, it wouldn't have exploded but the muzzle flash was more than enough to ignite the highly inflammable gas cloud…"

"Ah," the Director said pleasantly. "Then we owe you both a debt-for preventing him taking our resources and foiling his attack."

"It would have been better if you prevented his escape," Hiccup suggested sarcastically. "Like maybe now?" There was an awkward pause and then the Director leaned forward and access the coms.

"Detain Mr Bludvist," he ordered and then listened. "What do you mean he's just left? Go after him! He has attacked me and two senior officers! That man is an enemy of BERK!" Hiccup leaned close to me, his eyes never leaving the Director.

"I doubt they will capture him, no matter what the Director says," he murmured. "BERK seems to have been completely open to him. So we need to ensure security is at maximum…and then we have to work out what he is after-and what he wants those dragons for…"

"To make people do what he orders-and destroy those who won't," I guessed and he nodded.

General Zakhysnyk stared at us and lifted her com, securing a channel to Colonel Throk.

"Code Red," she ordered. "Put BERK on highest alert. Ensure all dragons are visually accounted for and guarded at all times. No external access except to known personnel." Then she glanced at Hiccup and I. "Commander Haddock and Lieutenant Hofferson will be heading back to assemble a team. I have a feeling we will be prepping a mission to Iceland…" The Director stared in shock.

"Iceland?" he mouthed. Hiccup nodded.

"Drago has a plan and he will be moving it up now he has failed to secure our dragons," he explained. "But I think there may be something in the Icelandic National Archives-something that Drago has missed…because he has never been able to translate and read them. I can…and I know what I'm looking for now."
"Son…"

"Dad…General Haddock," Hiccup said clearly. "Somehow, he controls dragons…and not with an alpha like Toothless—he has something else. Whatever he has—and I think I have seen it—it is far more powerful than Toothless and with that dragon, he could use dragons to wage war… And then we would see what modern weapons would do against dragons who breathe fire hot enough to melt rock or can melt you with hot acid…"

There was a pregnant pause at that horrific mental image and then Director Handler nodded.

"That is a real danger," he admitted in a sober voice as Stoick scowled.

"I was after him years ago, when he was less powerful but just as ruthless," he said grimly. "He wanted me off the investigation then—and he succeeded by killing my wife and almost killing my son," he reminded them. "I know him. I have made it my life's work to track on his actions and ensure I am in a position to thwart his ambitions. I want to be involved."

There was a pause and General Zakhysnyk frowned.

"I believe that you still have unresolved issues surrounding your wife's death…" she began.

"Which Drago confessed to ordering!" Stoick shouted, his eyes flickering with hatred before he swallowed and visibly calmed himself. "I—I'm sorry. You are correct…" he mumbled as the woman arched a strawberry blonde eyebrow at the admission.

"No—you have every right to be angry," Hiccup said firmly. "As do I. Drago Bludvist is a man who cannot be reasoned with, a man so assured in his own vision and own rightness that he will do anything and deal with anyone to achieve his ends. Even condemning a young woman and three year old child to death." He took a slow breath. There was a pause and one of the screens brightened as a man in Russian Army uniform pressed the button and his silhouette transformed to rugged features with dark, troubled eyes.

"He dealt with Former Minister Ulmarsov," the man said, his thick Russian accent mangling the words. "The man was betraying national assets and State secrets to this man in return for riches that make our own oligarchs look like peasants…"

"All his dragons were hatched from a nest in Russian Federation territory," I explained.

"A fact which the President was most unhappy about," the Russian delegate admitted. "And while, of course, the Russian Federation would prefer to keep her own national assets, it is plain the eggs are explosive and the beasts extremely difficult and dangerous to handle…"

"They've already taken some and found they can't handle them," Hiccup murmured and I nodded.

"It was only a matter of time," I agreed. "But why do they want us to have the dragons?"

"Because Drago having them would be a huge threat," Stoick said in a low voice. "Meaning they have more intelligence than they are letting on…presumably from Former Minister Ulmarsov…" General Zakhysnyk nodded.

"I can use my contacts to see if there is any more information available," she murmured. The Director nodded thoughtfully.

"We will, of course, be delighted to take custody of the eggs and any beasts you require caring for," she offered seriously.
"And I'll bet we don't get all of them," Hiccup murmured. I nodded and I caught Stoick's eyes. He gave a small nod as well.

"I will contact the base and we will prepare a suitable storage area for the unhatched eggs…" General Zakhysnyk said thoughtfully.

"Pen Twelve," Hiccup suggested. "It's refrigerated and isolated so it would be ideal. It's also next to the insane Changewing so if anyone tries to break in, Shimmer will kill them without hesitation." His emerald eyes were locked on the shapes of the Council and a couple sagged in disappointment at his words.

"And I'm sure the Vets will be able to look after any new hatchlings-or juveniles handed over," I added. Another silhouette leaned forward and a woman in French Army uniform frowned.

"Do you have plans to retrieve the dragons from Bludvist?" she demanded and the Generals shared a look. I was certain that Stoick Haddock had a myriad of plans though I was uncertain what General Zakhysnyk would do. She turned her clear gaze on us.

"Commander Haddock-do you wish to lead on this?" she asked and he nodded, managing a salute.

"Yes, Ma'am," he acknowledged. "Drago needs to be stopped-and I have some ideas how we can start…" Director Handler steepled his fingers and nodded.

"As of now, Drago is BERK's Most Wanted," he said. "You and your riders are authorised to do whatever is necessary to stop him" Hiccup nodded and look up at me, flashing his lopsided grin.

"Fancy a trip to Iceland, Milady?" he asked.

oOo

Once the senior officers huddled together, we headed for the canteen and grabbed a pair of coffees and some sort of fancy pastries that seemed to be all the rage here before we made our way to the table. I carried the tray while Hiccup sped along on his crutches, his computer bag over his shoulder. We settled and sipped out drinks before I looked at him-then reached over and punched him in the shoulder.

"That's for worrying me to death!" I scolded him as he managed a small smile.

"You were worried?" he teased me. "Aww-I'm touched, Milady. But I wasn't willing to face Drago without some protection…because I know just how violently he responds to being crossed…" I stared at him.

"But how…when…?" I asked him and he smiled.

"There is something to be said for taking a lot less time to get ready to go out," he teased me gently. "I thought you'd have seen…but I guess you were as wound up as I was."

"More," I admitted, feeling the tension tighten my shoulders. "I mean, we both knew there were issues-how Drago got in and who has been helping him?" He nodded and took a thoughtful bite of his pastry.

"It's pretty clear he's paid for access and I worry how many remain in his pay—even though his offer has been rejected," he mused, pastry crumbs spraying the table. I sniggered and tried my own pastry: it was amazing, almonds and apricots and dried fruit all wrapped in buttery pastry infused with custard.
"So when you told them where the eggs would go…you were lying?" I asked and he smirked.

"No—but Shimmer will make a good guard-dragon, don't you think?" he suggested with his lopsided smile. I nodded, admiring his cunning in the face of a creature that had tried to kill him.

"Well, he hates you," I shot back with a smile and then stilled as his warm hand closed on mine, his grip gentle and reassuring. "When I was alone with him in the servers, Milady, all I thought of was you…and how I couldn't die because I wanted to be in your arms once more," he told me in a low voice. "And it's been so busy since I woke but all I want is to spend some quiet time with you…" My hand curled round his and I sighed.

"And that's not happening," I sighed as two men walked up to us. Both were in BERK uniforms but clearly just privates—and neither looked impressed by Hiccup's rank flashes.

"What are you supposed to be?" one asked, a buff dark-haired man with a thick German accent that failed to hide the disdain in his words. Hiccup looked up with a forced smile on his face.

"Commander of the Dragon Riders," he said, offering his hand. "And you are…?"

"What are you doing here?" the other man—a lean, very blond man with a nordic accent—asked directly. Hiccup arched an eyebrow.

"Following orders," he replied more cautiously. "And you are…?" The man glared.

"You realise you have damned us all?" he asked.

"No-why?" Hiccup shot back, his emerald gaze so focussed on the blond man that he missed the other man lunging for him—but I didn't, launching my coffee in his face and following it up with a very accurate punch. He went down as the blond man flicked out a knife.

"Nordica!" he yelled and cracked the blade down at Hiccup's chest as the dork shoved himself back from the table, crashing backwards with a gasp as his head hit the floor. The blade missed his chest by an inch as I emptied the Trank gun into the knifeman and he—and his stunned and now Tranked friend-crashed to the floor. I glared, the gun still clamped in my fist.

"Security!" I shouted. "What the Hell is going on here?" All eyes snapped to us and as three men from the security detail raced in and covered the downed men. "They attacked us." And then I looked up at them, my glare almost ready to melt steel. "What kind of Mickey Mouse organisation are you running here?" I looked around. "Get me the head of security now!" I demanded as they hauled the stunned men up and I ran to my downed boyfriend. He looked up into my face and gave a small groan.

"Er…ow?" he tried. "Thor—does everyone want to kill me?"

"Not me," I said sincerely, wrapping my hands around his and dragging him to his feet—foot—for he was still favouring his stump heavily. We stumbled to our feet and he grabbed his crutches, following the security detail to the officer and the Head of Security...

...who turned out to be an elegant Slovenian woman with dark hair, bright grey eyes and a narrow but determined face that somehow reminded me of Heather. She spoke perfect English and listened carefully to our concerns before sitting back.

"I am aware that there are worries about the integrity of the personnel and I think you are correct in
your concerns," she said. "Both of these men seem to be ones who are influenced by Drago Bludvist. I will run an immediate scan of those who have had contact with him and his organisation and I will also forensically examine their bank accounts as well. If Mr Bludvist has bribed with more than a piece of gum, we will find it." I nodded, not completely relieved but at least grateful our concerns were even credence.

"Thank you, Colonel Vlasic," I said. "We are merely concerned that Bludvists's malignant influence may corrupt the entire organisation and ensure no matter what we do, he will still be one step ahead of us. And that ultimately poses a risk for everyone." The woman smiled, her eyes cool.

"Have no fear, Lieutenant," she said soothingly. "I will ensure that he doesn't have that luxury." Hiccup frowned.

"What is Nordica?" he asked softly and she looked up and smiled gently.

"I have no idea," she lied and he nodded.

"Thank you," he said and turned to the door. I saluted and followed him, catching him outside. He hadn't saluted her and I was about to remind him when his hand closed tightly on my arm. "She's lying," he told me carefully. "We need to leave-now. Call the Generals-both of them. I'll get us flights to Glasgow." I paused-then nodded...because there was something in his voice that had me worried. Something had seriously spooked him and he was running for home-and he wanted the General and his father safely out of BERK. I nodded and threw a small salute.

"Aye, aye, Commander Dragon Boy," I said quietly and he offered me a pained smile.

"Let's go home," he said.

oOo

We flew in by private plane from Brussels Airport to Glasgow with General Zakhysnyk and with General Haddock, who had been assigned as our liaison officer with BERK HQ, much to Hiccup's relief-though I wouldn't have believed it mere weeks earlier. I had no idea how Hiccup swung it-though he confided in me on the drive back to the base that he had put aside a little of Alvin's money into an account that he had used to fund the travel and anything he needed to access to defeat Drago. I smiled at his resourcefulness but reminded him not to get caught since I was 200% certain the General would not approve. And then he had gently leaned forward and kissed me, his gentle fingers sliding over my warm cheek as he had pulled away with a small smile.

"I'm Hiccup," he reminded me. "Of course I'll be caught!"

"Better not, cuz," Snotlout said from the front seat, where he was sitting by Eret-who was driving. "That would mean I would get stuck helping Astrid sort out Thuggory, the twins and the rest...and honestly, I would have to set Hookie to incinerate them all because..."

"Snotlout," I growled and he sighed.

"Fine-I wouldn't dare but I would end up doing the paperwork and honestly that would kill me. Did you know that the General sent back my last report with every 'awesome' circled in red? I mean, what General doesn't appreciate a report filled with the word awesome?"

"Um...all of them?" I suggested as Hiccup chuckled in his seat.

"I think I've missed this," he commented cheerfully as we wove our way through the narrow mountain road leading up to the Highland villages that strung along the way to the Base. Eret
jerked the car hard as we rounded a hairpin. "But not that…"

"Babe-you ride a Night Fury!" I pointed out and his hand gripped mine tightly.

"Yeah-and I'm in charge!" he reminded me as I snuggled into him.

"I'm here with you,' I reassured him as he sighed.

"Yeah-and if we're in a mangled heap at the bottom of a valley, I will appreciate it…” We jolted sideways. "Easy up there, guys-still a bit battered here. And a really nervous passenger…” I could see Snotlout give an evil smile in the rear view mirror and scowled.

"Sergeant Jorgensen…if you think for one minute you are going to…” I began as Eret floored it. "I am going to kill you!" I yelled as we roared forward. "And if you don't survive, you can't come on the awesome mission we're going on!"

There was a pause and the brakes screeched as we slowed down and suddenly drove more sensibly.

"Awesome mission?" Snotlout murmured calculatingly. Hiccup slid down in his seat.

"Oh Thor," he muttered. "Aren't I going to get any peace?" I leaned up and kissed him.

"I think they won't let us go alone so we may as well take people we can rely on," I suggested as we headed back to the base. Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"And I can see how well that is going to go," he sighed. "Should we warn the Icelandic Government?" I chuckled.

"No-we can leave them to have a nice surprise when the Dragon Riders of BERK arrive."

oOo

Glasgow Airport was bustling as we walked through six days later, the PA announcements calling for Icelandair Flight 431 passengers to head for gate 30. Hiccup was walking alongside me, limping hard but crutch free, looking self-conscious in a deep red arctic jacket with his computer bag over his shoulder while I was in my baby blue ski jacket, my walking boots laced tightly.

Behind us, Thuggory, Snotlout, the twins and Fishlegs were all ambling along with various degrees of comfort, interest or exasperation. Hiccup and I had secured adjacent seats in business class-to ensure he had adequate room for his injured leg-and we were also booked into a double room in a reasonable hotel in Reykjavik. Snotlout was already grumbling that he was in economy but the General had taken a lot of persuasion to get her to authorise Hiccup's seat…and he had refused without me, so we were in business and the rest were sitting in economy.

And I can't say I was unhappy, because I wanted some time alone with my Dragon Boy. And though it was only a two hour flight, I would be with Hiccup and that was enough. No twins, no Thuggory and especially…no Snotlout.

"How long do we have to wait?" Snotlout whined as we queued up at the boarding gate. "My feet hurt. I'm feeling sleepy and I haven't had any food for ages!"

"Actually, you just finished a burger from one of the concessions!" Fishlegs reminded him.

"There was food on offer?" Tuff asked in an offended voice. "Why did no one ever tell us?"

"The waitress asked you three times if you wanted some food!" Thuggory said in an exasperated
"You said you wanted to watch the flying chickens! And then you went and hung upside down over the rail to the lower foyer pointing at the aircraft and yelling 'Chicken!'"

"But did anyone actually tell me I needed to order food at that point?" Tuff insisted. Blinking, Thuggory looked over at Ruff.

"Seriously?" he asked and she nodded, grinning broadly.

"He's an idiot," she reminded him. "But he's my brother so I'm stuck with him." They shuffled forward and Ruff handed over both of their boarding passes, offering an apologetic look at the airline employee as Tuff leaned close and peered at the scanner as the boarding passes were scanned in. "Definitely an idiot," she repeated in a long-suffering voice. Hiccup and I looked over from the other line and we shared a look as we headed along the gate to the plane. Automatically, our hands locked and we walked at his pace as we reached the door. The very blonde stewardess smiled brightly and welcomed us aboard, showing us to our very comfortable seats before we settled in. We stored our hand luggage and coats in the overhead racks and strapped ourselves in before Hiccup stretched his leg out and grimaced.

"Sore?" I murmured and he nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

"I'm not sure what we'll find there," he admitted. "I mean, he loaned an enormous sum to the Icelandic Government meaning he—in effect—has the entire country in his debt. He owns half the businesses in the country directly or indirectly and he's mad."

"Angry?"

"Insane," he said quietly, turning to me. "Psychopath, megalomaniac, choose your term…but he has plan. And he has a lot of dragons, Astrid. More than you can imagine." I thought back to what Liam had said to me and I nodded.

"Cami is there with her family," I told him gently. "She will help us, if she can. But she has to look out for her clan as well…try to get them away by all means…"

"What concerns me is that Heather is there as well," Hiccup reminded me thoughtfully. "She will watch Cami like a hawk. Though that has never worked previously, to be honest. By anyone. And this time, Cami will have her family at her side to help her." He managed a small smile. "Our best hope is to sneak in under the radar and hope Drago doesn't know we're here until we're leaving." I nodded and then winced as I heard the twins and Snotlout start whooping at the tops of their voice. I could imagining Thuggory wincing and Fishlegs burying his head in an e-book, pretending he didn't know them.

"Good luck with that," I said as the flight attendants began to run through the safety briefing. "I'm surprised he doesn't already know we're on the way!"

"Yup—he can probably hear them from Akureyki," he admitted. "But the answer lies in Iceland…so we have to go anyway."

"I wish we could have brought the dragons," I sighed and he nodded.

"But until we know what he's up to—and what his Alpha can do, if we take them, we may lose them completely," he reminded me as the briefing ended and the aircraft juddered as we pushed back. "Though I really wish we could have flown to Iceland by dragon…" His hand clamped around mine and I grinned.

"Ace dragon-rider…but nervous passenger," I smirked. He flinched as
"I hate not being in control…" he mumbled as we trundled down the taxiway to take our place in the queue for takeoff. His hand tightened on mine and I squeezed back.

"I'd have thought you were used to it, with that lot as your team," I quipped and he rolled his eyes.

"And everyone's a joker," he groaned as the engines roared and I almost lost sensation in my hand as he crushed it suddenly. His eyes widened and he tensed as we accelerated up the runway. "Here we go…"

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Iceland was cold. Even though we were well wrapped up, the wind was bitter, cutting through us, for all that it was sunny and bright. We cleared customs and immigration and then retrieved our bags…though I was astonished at how much luggage Snotlout had managed to bring for a short working trip. His suitcase would have lasted me a two week holiday! But as he dragged the huge case along, the polished shell gleaming in the artificial lights of the arrivals hall, he looked up defiantly.

"A man has to make sure he has his home comforts…and all this beautiful face needs proper care," he protested, stomping off with the huge case in tow. I raised an eyebrow as the twins wandered by, each with a small rucksack over a shoulder.

"Really?" Hiccup nodded.

"He's very serious about his fitness and beauty regime," he reminded me and I stared. I hadn't really clocked how much effort the stocky sergeant paid to his appearance but then, I had spent much of the time ignoring his foibles and concentrating on keeping myself and Hiccup alive…and on our relationship. "Of course, you can always spend more time with him if you want to know more and…"

"Yuk. And no," I told him, flexing my left hand with my engagement ring to remind him who I wanted to be with. "The guide book said taking the bus was the best option…"

"And that ship has sailed," Hiccup told me, his face adopting a slightly pained expression. "Can you imagine Snot on a bus?" I shook my head. "I ordered a seven person taxi before we took off…"

And we emerged to find the minivan waiting, a patient looking man sitting in the driver's seat as we ambled up, checked it was our cab and got in. The twins squabbled, Fishlegs grumbled as he was jostled and Snotlout took the front seat by the driver so he could bore the man senseless with his complaints about how cold and uncomfortable the journey was. Thuggory sat by Fishlegs and the husky rider calmly chatted to the lieutenant, who was feeling out of his depth…but had come because General Zakhysnyk had insisted. Even though he and the gang knew who was actually in charge.

The views were spectacular as we drove up through the Reykjanes peninsula as we headed north from Keflavik airport towards Reykjavik. It was sunny and bright, the sky blue and cloudless and sea a deeper blue to our left. The land was a patchwork of black basalt flows with interspersed green grassy and scrub areas and a few lingering patches of ice and snow. To our right, the mountains rose in the distance, snow firmly capping their peaks and my breath was taken away by the sight.

"It says here that this land is all volcanic and was formed by lava flows," Fishlegs read from his guide book. The twins were immediately interested. "The eruption of the volcano Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 caused massive disruption to aviation in the north Atlantic area and Europe…"
"Ejafyalla what?" Ruff frowned.

"Eyjafjallajökull," Fishlegs repeated, his accent perfect. Of course, he spoke Norse like Hiccup—which was why he was here. I knew Hiccup wasn't leaving anything to chance.

"And can we make it blow up?" Tuff asked hopefully. "Because that would be awesome…" There was a pause and Hiccup frowned, then dragged out his computer and began typing away furiously. I stared at him, then turned back to watch Fishlegs try to explain why that would definitely not be awesome.

"Awww…you're no fun, Fish," Ruff whined, though there was a gleam in her eyes and the husky boy blushed. I wondered what I was missing.

"I am too," he protested as Tuff slumped down in his seat.

"I still think it would be fun," he grumbled as Snotlout craned his neck.

"What about food?" he asked pointedly. "I'm hungry!"

There was a loud groan and I wondered if this was what they were like the whole time. Of course, when we travelled to Birmingham, I had been in a different carriage to the others so I probably hadn't been exposed to their concentrated craziness. It was like being on a school trip with a bunch of five year olds.

"Icelandic food has a lot of fresh and preserved fish as well as meat. A popular local delicacy is Hakari which is putrescent or rotten shark…” Fishlegs read on and Tuff almost swooned in excitement.

"Oh. My. THOR!" he yelled. "Now that really is awesome!"

"Bleurgh!" Snotlout protested and Fishlegs shuddered.

"I agree," he said firmly as Tuff swivelled round to face him.

"But it's awesome…"

"No, it's not," Fishlegs snapped at the male twin. "Have you forgotten when Dagur and Savage thought it would be hilarious to feed me rotten fish heads? They had Meatlug at Deathwing the Skill’s mercy and threatened her so I had to eat them…I was vomiting for weeks…” Tuff chuckled.

"Wow…I had forgotten that," he murmured. "I wonder what Smidvarg thinks…” And a familiar head popped out of his rucksack. We all stared and Hiccup groaned.

"How on Midgard…” he began and then shook himself. "I don't even want to know how you managed to get him through customs and security…really, truly, I don't!...but you have to keep him under wraps. Thor, why does this keep happening…?" We rounded a corner and I looked out the window. We were on a wide, very clean avenue and there were clean, white and pale coloured buildings lining the road and surrounding us, including a four storey one up ahead with the plain, neat label 'Hotel Atlantic'.

"We're here," I said as we pulled up and I opened the door. Hiccup snapped his computer shut, his face grim as he scrambled to his feet.

"Now I know what we're looking for," he said firmly. "To work."
A/N: Any resemblance to a real 'Hotel Atlantic' is purely coincidental. I just chose the name because it was nicely generic and possible. No offence intended.
The Master of Dragons

Sixty Eight: The Master of Dragons.

We had a lovely fourth floor double room which we checked into and as one, we collapsed onto the bed, side by side.

"Do we have to go out, babe?" I asked plaintively as his arm snaked around me, pulling me close so he could press his lips to my forehead. I wrapped an arm around him.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Even if I didn't want to stop the twins destroying Reykjavik, we have to get to the Archives before Drago realises I'm here. Because when we arrived, people were watching." I shifted onto my side to stare into his face and he sighed. "After all these years, I kind of have a sense of being watched. And I know that Drago's people will be on our tail." I hugged him and sighed.

"Hey, babe-you're just a researcher here from the University of St Andrews, working for your Masters in Ancient Nordic Languages," I reminded him and he smiled.

"Thor, I had forgotten," he smiled. "I'm back at school again…for the last three days…"

"Only way to have waterproof cover, babe," I pointed out. "You are a registered student again-you even have an NUS card…" He smiled and lay back, before fishing out the smartphone he had been given by BERK. It was the newest, most powerful model and as he logged into the hotel wifi, he sighed.

"Archives are closed for the day," he reported with a sigh. "Forgot about the time it would take to fly and travel and…well, I think it's early closing today." I sat up and sighed.

"Okay-so we unpack, freshen up and then I think we should go for a walk…" I began and then I groaned. "Sorry, babe-thoughtless…" I apologised but he wrapped an arm around me and pulled me back down, kissing me very tenderly.

"Actually, I quite fancy a walk myself," he told me. "My leg is stiff and Gothi was very adamant I need to exercise…"

"Love you," I mumbled.

"Me too," he murmured. I smirked.

"You love you?" I teased him and he sighed.

"I love you," he told me and kissed the tip of my nose. "Now please help me up and we can see if we can get a little walk before dinner…" I sat up again and grabbed his hands, hauling him up to a sitting position. "You go first…"

After a fast shower and a change of clothing, we wrapped up and headed along the road-Laugavegur, I think—which had a number of nice but pricey shops and a selection of restaurants. But the houses were colourful and sturdy but different to home, the street was straight and very clean and the people were friendly. And when we reached the end, we could see the expanse of Reykjavik Bay laid down ahead of us and I smiled. He stood behind me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me back against his body, nuzzling into my neck.
"This is perfect, Astrid," he murmured. "I just wish that I could have brought you here for a holiday where we could spend time together, just sightseeing and walking and enjoying this place…but instead…" I turned my head and kissed his cheek.

"You know, babe-if we go on holiday, I would prefer somewhere sunny and warm," I told him. "And I know the dragons would be with me on that…" He sniggered against my neck, kissing me lightly.

"Yeah-I can see British Airways really allowing them into Business," he chuckled. "But of course, not really designed for sunny. You may not have noticed due to the fabulous Scottish weather…but I'm a bit…freckly…and if you put me into the sun, I turn into one huge freckle, moments before I turn bright red, peel and get sunstroke…" I couldn't help myself-I burst out laughing.

"I promise I'll get you sunblock and a parasol," I giggled as he tightened his hug around me. "We'll go somewhere that we can both enjoy…but for now, this is perfect."

Our phones both went off and we sighed and fished them out. Hiccup's read TUFF while mine flashed up RUFF. Sharing a look, we both answered simultaneously.

"HEY!" they yelled and Hiccup frowned.

"Hey guys-what's up?" he asked amiably.

"Snotlout is hungry so we're heading out for food," Ruff explained to me. "We're leaving the hotel now."

"Turn left from the hotel and head along the street," Hiccup told Tuff. "We'll meet you and we can go to a restaurant together…"

"Awesome!" Tuff yelled so that I could hear it over both our phones. The twins hung up.

"Well, I guess that answers the question about what we do now," he said ironically. I slipped my arm through his and smirked.

"I'll bet anything Tuff tries to have that rotten shark," I grinned as we headed back along the road.

We met them halfway along and found a nice clean restaurant that served excellent fresh fish and seafood-and Tuff did indeed order Hakari. The others ordered beers but Hiccup stuck to sparkling water while I had a diet coke and we all ordered fish as well as the fish to make his own giant version of 'surf and turf'. But the real excitement came as we all watched Tuff's meal arrive. Notwithstanding it cost a fortune, it smelled really bad and I saw Fishlegs gag. Hiccup wrinkled his nose and I frowned and covered my mouth with my napkin.

Tuff's face lit up and he smirked at Ruffnut, who had gone for cod and then he took a big bite of his revolting meal.

There was a long pause and his expression congealed as he took a few reluctant chews as the taste permeated his mouth. He blinked and took another chew.

"Are you enjoying that?" Snotlout taunted him, taking an obvious bite of his steak. Tuff nodded.

"Great," he mumbled. Ruff peered at him.

"Are you crying?" she asked him pointedly. He shook his head.

"M'fine," he mumbled, swiping his eyes.
"Because I have noticed you haven't actually swallowed anything," Snotlout commented, sipping his beer.

"Mmm," Tuff mumbled and then, forcing himself, he swallowed. His face went green and he chugged almost his entire beer. "Another beer!" he called urgently, waving at the waiter. The man nodded pleasantly and leaned close.

"It is traditional to drink Brennevin with the Hakari," he suggested pleasantly.

"The Black Death," Fishlegs added sagely as the male twin looked up.

"Black Death?" he managed hoarsely, looking hopeful.

"Our signature liquor, so called due to the black label," the waiter explained cheerfully and produced a large green bottle with the black label. Tuff nodded and offered his glass urgently. "It is particularly strong…" the waiter warned him but he just waved his glass.

"I think I may need it," Tuff croaked, still looking green and the waiter filled his glass up. Taking a deep breath, Tuff shovelled up a big mouthful of the putrid meal and stuffed it in his mouth and chased it down with a large gulp of the Black Death. He swallowed and gave a happy smile.

"There," he said more cheerfully. "I could barely taste any of it that time!"

"Oh, this isn't going to go well," Hiccup commented sarcastically as I took a bite of my salmon. "I forecast food poisoning and severe inebriation. Possibly alcohol poisoning…"

"Definitely alcohol poisoning," I corrected him. "Dinner and a show-what more could we want?"

"I am fully prepared to be freckled and burnt to a crisp," he said suddenly. "Just to get away from them…"

"Okay-I bet you end up vomiting the whole lot up!" Snotlout taunted him. Tuff swallowed another mouthful of Hakari and Brennevin.

"Doubt it," he said cockily. "And I bet you can't drink this Black Death. Not man enough!" That was enough to have Snotlout waving to the waiter and getting his own glass filled with the liquor.

"And that happened," Hiccup noted. "Now there'll be two of them drunk and belligerent…” I took another bite of my excellent meal and sighed.

"Look-the others will just have to nursemaid them because you are taking me on a romantic walk, babe," I told him. "It's gotten dark and I fancy a view over the bay at night…before it gets too serious…" Smiling suddenly, he sat back and sipped his fizzy water.

"You're right," he told me gently and allowed a small smile to curve his lips. "Now we can watch those muttonheads have a drinking contest with a liquor called Black Death safe in the knowledge we don't have to carry them home or share a room with them!"

"Win-win," I smiled, finishing my fish. "And for the record-I think both of them will be throwing up by bedtime."

Tuff did finish his Hakari-and half a bottle of the Brennevin-with Snot polishing off the other half bottle. I suspect that I should have tried to stop them as a medical professional but honestly, they were acting like they were full of testosterone and completely devoid of brain so I reckoned they could do with the lesson. We paid and shared a word with Thuggory, who promised with Fishlegs to get them back to the hotel as we headed out along the street and then up the steep hill to a square
at the top where the cathedral, Hallgrímskirkja according to the sign, overlooked the bay. We stared at the illuminated white structure with its modern clean lines and tower and I sighed.

"It's beautiful," I murmured and felt Hiccup take my hands.

"Not as beautiful as you," he murmured and kissed me and there, with the icy cold and bright stars overhead, the orange lights of the city spread below us and around the shoreline and the faint green smudge of the aurora overhead, I didn't want to be anywhere else.

"Don't move," an unfamiliar voice sneered.

Hiccup sagged.

"Just once," he mumbled against my lips. "For once in my life it would be nice to manage a date without interruption..."

"Never gonna happen," I mumbled as we turned to face the person who had interrupted us...and found ourselves facing a man with short dark hair, a manicured goatee and dark eyes sparkling in a narrow, tanned face. There was no warmth in his expression at all—or that of the two, extremely burly men who flanked him. All wore black leather and looked fierce and I was instantly on edge, tense and thanking whoever was listening that we hadn't been drinking. The flanking heavies moved sideways to pen us in as the central man's mouth curled into a sneer.

"You imagine the Dreki Meistari has not been watching you ever since you landed," he scoffed.

"Told you!" he whispered triumphantly and I elbowed him, my eyes flicking over the enemies, looking for a weakness or opening. Their coats had a suspicious bulge under the arms suggestive of a shoulder holster.

"Not the time, babe," I muttered.

"So your Dreki Meistari has nothing better to do than spy on a Masters student and a junior doctor," he sassed them, his eyes narrowed. He was trying to work out what they were after, I guess but his hand gently closed on mine. "I mean, we were just here for a nice romantic walk and..."

"And you imagine Bludvist is fooled by your pitiful attempts to masquerade as a legitimate scholar?" the man said, the scar on his cheek moving as he spoke, his enunciation perfect.

"I am a legitimate scholar," Hiccup said sternly, his hand nudging me to the left and my eyes trailed in that direction, seeing the bike. The street lights gleamed off the key in the ignition and I squeezed his hand back to show I had seen—and my other hand fumbled in my pocket for my phone.

"And as my Masters is in Ancient Nordic Linguistics, Iceland is a perfect place to visit...well, especially for the scenery, the Aurora, the friendly people..."

"The dragons," I said suddenly and my thumb stabbed for my ring tone. A Nadder roar at full volume erupted and all three of our assailants snapped back, heads craning back to look up for the dragon. I shoved Hiccup in the direction of the motorbike as I grabbed the bin and lobbed it at the men, before sprinting after Hiccup. Despite his limp, he had made the bike and was already turning the key and gunning the engine. I clambered on without hesitation as he changed the gears and kicked off.

"Do you know how to drive this?" I asked him as we took off. My arms tightened around his waist.

"Um...Gobber tried to teach me...and I think I can remember the gears," he said as we hared down the steep road towards the intersection. I heard the roar of an engine and a sleek black SUV with
tinted windows accelerated after us. Riding pillion behind a man who wasn't sure how to drive the
motorbike we were on with a car chasing us and no helmet was awakening all those medical
qualms that I had pushed aside effectively when I started riding Stormfly.

The sounds of the car closed as we reached the intersection and Hiccup threw us sideways, leaning
like a pro and I realised that riding dragons wasn't that different as I hung onto him, pressed hard
against his lean shape.

"You okay back there, Milady?" he called and there was amusement on his voice.

"Okay—I hate not being in control as well!" I called back grumpily as a bullet hit the shop to our
right.

"Hold on…I have an idea!" he called as we shot up onto the pavement and zipped up a narrow
walkway that the car couldn't follow, erupting onto a street behind and parallel to the main
Laugavagur street and then doubling round and zooming straight downhill towards the harbour. I
could hear the dull thud of a base beat and we skidded across a pedestrian crossing, just missing
the SUV which had shot up the next street after we had vanished.

"Better make it quick, babe," I suggested as they closed on us. He wrenched us sideways down a
narrow alley and as we vanished from sight, we stopped and he jumped from the bike, limping but
grabbing my arm.

"Trust me!" he suggested and hauled us onto the road-and right into the door of a Night Club. The
thunderous beat was coming from within and he grinned and handed over rather a lot of kronor for
our entrance…but as soon as we were in, he headed directly for the enormous man on the door.
Honestly, I have never seen such an enormous muscular man. He was a little taller than Hiccup but
about three times as wide—and it was all muscle. And then it clicked: he was one of those
professional bodybuilder types and as I realised, Hiccup offered the man a small smile and spoke in
pretty convincing Icelandic.

His arm wrapped around my waist and the man nodded, a smile lifting his rugged face. His blond
hair was cropped very short and his ice blue eyes twinkled understandingly—before he turned to me
and offered a small smile.

"I apologise that you have been harassed by my countrymen," he said in accented English. "My
friends and I will make sure you are not bothered any more. Please…allow us to deal with them
while you enjoy your time in the club…" I nodded.

"Thank you," I said softly and smiled as Hiccup's hand tightened around my waist. "You're very
kind…" He nodded and ushered us in as he gathered the other two-equally huge-bouncers and
headed for the doors. I looked up at my fiancé.

"Okay—what did you say?" I asked. "And how do you know Icelandic?"

"Um…I learned when I realised Bludvist was the biggest threat we have," he told me. "I think my
accent is pretty poor—he was wincing…"

"What did you say to him?" I asked as he steered us onto the dance floor. He smiled.

"I told him we were being harassed and chased by some drunken and abusive locals," he explained,
as we made the crowded floor. "He looks fairly intimidating…and I guessed Bludvist's men
wouldn't cause a scene in here. Once they've gone, we can get a taxi home. Um…all I could think of…"
"It's brilliant," I smiled, wrapping my arms around his neck. His warm hands slid around my waist and rested in my hips. "Wanna dance?" He blushed and for a moment, there was shame in his glorious emerald eyes.

"Can't," he mumbled. "Not even counting the leg, I'm far too clumsy..." I rose on tip toes and pulled him into a very tender kiss, his eyes fluttering closed as he leaned forward into the kiss. He sighed when I pulled back and looked into his face.

"Hiccup-babe-you are brilliant and brave and a wee bit sarcastic but you're not clumsy...and anyone can dance," I told him as the music slowed and I smiled. "You got us out of there and drove that bike like an expert...now let me drive..." I've had the time of my life," started and I gently started to sway. "Keep your hands on my hips and sway with me. Look into my eyes and relax. And don't worry-unlike you, I've done this before..." He gave a wan smile.

"And...I have to trust you..." he said with a small smile. "I can live with that, Milady..." And as we swayed to the familiar tune, I saw his smile widen and eyes shine with surprise and delight. His hands were gentle on my hips as he leaned close to whisper in my ear. "And there is no one else I would rather be here with."

oOo

A scream had jolted me from sleep and my eyes slammed open, recognising the voice of my lover and scrambling to check for attackers. I was in a fog of confusion, anxious and shocked as he screamed again, his arms raised in fear to try to ward off whatever shade was terrifying him.

"NO! Mom!" he cried, reaching pitifully out for an unseen memory. "Mom? Are...are you okay?" His hand pressed to his head. "Mommy? My head hurts..."

I slowly sat up and saw his glazed eyes staring in despair and incomprehension.

"Mom? Please wake up..." Hiccup begged softly, his hands stretching out much further than his three year old self could have possibly have dreamed. "Please don't leave me..."

My heart broke then, realising he was reliving the death of his mother in that crash that we had learned was deliberate, the vicious act of Drago Bludvist-so I immediately wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tight, feeling him shaking before he buried his face in my neck. His trembling arms hugged me fiercely and I felt tears in my skin.

"Hiccup?" I asked him softly and he swallowed, sniffing.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he relaxed slightly. I leaned in close and kissed his scruffy cheek, tasting salt.

"S'okay, babe," I reassured him.

"It was him..." he murmured.

"What?" I sounded confused and he took a shuddering breath.

"In the car that ran us off the road. I looked over...and he was driving. The eyes and face were the same. He didn't have the scar then...but it was him," he mumbled. "He killed Mom."

"And tried to kill you," I added, hugging him hard. "He failed then and he failed now. But this time, you don't have to face him alone, babe-because you have me. You have us. And we are all here with you." He sniffed again and then nodded, lying down snuggled against me, our arms around
each other. He sighed, his eyelids fluttering.

"I don't know what I would do without you," he breathed.

"Not have anyone to teach you to dance," I murmured and felt him shift against me and then settle. "Remember, there should always be a Hiccup and Astrid, remember?"

"Love you," he murmured.

"You too…" I mumbled.

The next morning, there were sore heads in the party. We were really tired but in good shape otherwise after our broken night, very grateful to Magnus the Bouncer for kindly paying for our taxi home-but Tuff and Snot were about 85% dead and severely hung over much to Thuggery's disgust and Ruff's delight…because she kept talking extremely loudly and dropping things behind the two victims. Hiccup, jaded though he was, was trying not to smile as Snotlout groaned and whimpered, pressing his hands to his ears.

"How can you possibly do that?" he whined.

"I am very much hurt," Tuff groaned, holding his head.

"Has anyone got any ice?" Snotlout whimpered.

"Oh, I should DEFINITELY think so!" Ruff said very loudly in his ear. "It's ICELAND after all!"

"Could someone cut my head off now because it would save time?" Tuff begged. Ruff grabbed a cake slice which was by an improbable gateau that was placed boldly amid the smoked fish, yoghurt, eggs, black bread and rollmops, and brandished it around very dangerously, almost taking off Fishlegs's ear.

"Hey!" he said, grabbing her hand and carefully removing the implement. "Tuff can cut his own head off-on his own time!"

"No one is cutting any heads off!" Thuggory growled over his coffee.

"Absolutely not!" I snapped. "No one else has any surgical training. And I'm not doing it! Tuff-you'll just have to take lots of fluids, paracetamol and aspirin like everyone else!" Hiccup cracked open his egg and sighed.

"Guys-Drago is watching us," he reminded them in a low voice. "He's calling himself Dreki Meistari—the Master of Dragons. We know the title is literal…but his ships are all called Dreki something…Drekakonungur, Drekadrottning, Dreki prinsessa…"

"What?" Thuggory frowned.

"Dragon King, Queen and Princess…his three largest ships in descending order of size," Hiccup murmured. "All large container ships…perfect for transporting dragons. And I wonder…are any of them in port?" Thuggory gave a nasty smile.

"We'll go find out," he said firmly. "And I have my team. Sergeant!" His yell would have raised the dead-and almost made Snotlout one of them.

"AARGH!" he groaned and pressed both hands pathetically to his ears. "Sir?" he whimpered.

"Get yourself and the Thorstons fallen in!" Thuggory snapped causing both hungover soldiers to
cringe. "NOW!"

I was chuckling as the three reluctantly rose and stumbled out-though Ruff was laughing hard at their distress. The lieutenant flipped us a salute which we returned but we all gave a sigh of relief when they left. I looked over at Fish.

"So fancy playing wallflower again?" I teased him and he blushed.

"No-I'm just here to read old Icelandic!" he replied and I smiled.

"Good man," Hiccup complimented him. He was looking pale but seemed in good spirits after his nightmare.

"I liked the mission you set the others," I complimented him.

"Really? I was trying to find something for them to do without wrecking the city," he admitted. "But anything Drago is doing is of interest…and it may distract his men…"

"What?" Fishlegs asked anxiously and I smiled.

"I'll tell you in the cab," I promised as we finished our coffees and headed down to the street, asking reception to call us a taxi to take us to the National Archive. And as we sailed through the clean, bright streets, I swiftly gave a précis of our evening to the husky Rider and his blue-green eyes narrowed as he heard about the men who had ambushed us by the church.

"Are you armed?" he asked us and I nodded.

"But so are they," I admitted and sighed as we rounded the corner and the modern white building came into view. We pulled up before the glass entrance and I paid the driver while Hiccup and Fishlegs headed in. They had the credentials while I had come along for the ride-and because I didn't trust Hiccup not to get into trouble without me. They were given authorisation and ID badges…but before he went in, Hiccup walked to me and wrapped his arms around me.

"Will you be okay?" he asked and I nodded.

"Much as I love you, babe, watching you pore through old manuscripts is probably my idea of one of the worse circles of Hell," I told him lightly, kissing him gently. "Have fun. I'm walking up to the Pearl restaurant-it's probably about fifteen minutes up the hill…"

"Take care," he advised me seriously. "Those guys are still out there and they may be a bit ticked off about last night…"

"You don't say," I teased him and felt him tenderly kiss my cheek.

"Be careful," he whispered and then turned away, walking alongside Fishlegs as they headed towards the stacks while I walked out into the brilliant sunshine, blinking at the brilliance, before I headed out across the car park and out onto the drive, up to the domed restaurant that overlooked the city and the bay. It was cool and I needed my coat, but I was enjoying the walk and I made the building after fifteen minutes, entering and looking around before heading up to the upper floor balcony. The city was spread below me and as I gazed across the sparkling city, a smile tilted my lips. Yes, I really wanted to come back here when this was all over and show Hiccup this view. Maybe for our honeymoon?

And as soon as I thought the word, a roar shattered the peace, echoing across the Bay. And again. I stared across the bay and saw a shape rise from the waters: grey, crowned by spines and larger than
any dragon I had seen so far. But I knew what type of dragon this was—because I had held one after it had hatched.

Snowy.

This was Drago Bludvist's Bewilderbeast. In Reykjavik Bay.

And as I watched, a swarm of dragons rose from the port and circled the dragon…before heading directly towards me…
He knew he should feel guilty at the exhilaration of being let loose in the Icelandic Archives to finally see the documents he had longed to examine for so long while Astrid just hung around but Hiccup was almost quivering with excitement. He had the access codes to the climate controlled 'Ancient' section and even with his sore leg, he was surging ahead of Fishlegs, who was squealing with excitement. The two young men had geeked out on the taxi ride up and though Astrid had borne it patiently, Hiccup knew she had felt excluded by their frantic exchange of dragon facts and speculating what they would find.

The whole area was clean and spacious, the stacks made of steel and glass, sectioned off to protect the priceless volumes separately. Hiccup and Fishlegs headed for the back and swiped themselves through the sealed glass doors into the Ancient Section, hearing the change as the doors closed and cut out all external noise.

"This is so exciting!" Fishlegs whispered and Hiccup nodded, heading directly to the shelf and pulling on a pair of soft white cloth gloves, before he reverently lifted down a leather-bound volume and placed it gently onto the cushioned table.

"We don't know how long we have and we need to get the scans as soon as possible," he said, pulling out his phone. BERK had modified it with a super-sensitive 40MP camera, IR overlay and enormous memory. Quietly, Fishlegs opened the first page of 'the Chronicle of Dragon's Edge' and he clicked the first scan. Efficiently, Fishlegs gently turned the pages and Hiccup snapped each one, steadfastly ignoring the squeaks and squeals of excitement from the husky rider and powered through. His eyes flicked over ancient and half-obscured runes, writing that had faded-but which was almost clear as day under the infra-red overlay, images of exotic dragons and details of the life of the brave dragon-riding settlers of the isolated outpost. His eyes trailed over a squat lumpy dragon with knobbly hide and tiny eyes…and the word ERUPTODON scrawled beneath. His eyes widened and he almost paused in his work—but he knew this was the most crucial part of the mission so he forced Fishlegs to turn the page and continued snapping each image until they reached the back cover.

"Is that it?" the husky rider asked in disappointment and Hiccup sighed, rubbing his constricted neck. He had been stooped over the book for however long it had taken but he carefully stowed the phone and then shook his head.

"No," he said with a small smile. "Now we have a chance to have a proper look-starting with the Eruptodon…" Fishlegs's eyes grew rounder.

"You mean the lava-eating large Boulder-class dragon on page 33?" he asked and Hiccup stared at him.

"Huh. And Astrid calls me a dork sometimes," he commented with a twinkle in his eyes. "You, my friend, are a total Dragon geek!" And then he grinned. "But I want a closer look because it may explain something…"

And then the entire room shuddered and the two men slammed to the floor as cracks appeared in the roof and plaster dust showered down in them. Fishlegs stared up in shock and cringed under the table.
"What's happening?" he yelped and Hiccup looked up, feeling rather than hearing the boom of an explosion and he glanced up at the roof. The crack had widened and part of the roof was starting to drop.

"Dragon attack!" he realised and his head snapped round. "Fish-get the door. We need to get out of here. This place is going down!" The room juddered again and the creak of the roof grew louder as Fishlegs sped to the door and swiped his card. And again. But nothing happened.

"Door's stuck!" he cried in a panic. Hiccup peered up and shifted position.

"Get the panel off," he said firmly, fumbling under his shirt and finding the small tool pouch around his wrist that he had copied from his flight suit. And then he flung himself across the gap as a few fragments of the roof began to fall. There was another impact and the whole room shook—and then one of the stacks fell over, priceless manuscripts spilling to ruin on the floor amid steel and shattered glass. Determinedly, the auburn-haired rider unscrewed the contacts, checked the mechanism and then, with a prayer, he touched the wires—and the door hissed open. In an instant, Fishlegs shot out—but Hiccup glanced back and saw the book.

It took him less than a second but he stumbled across to the table and scooped the priceless book in his arms. The room shook and another two stacks fell, showering him with glass and he stumbled back, trying to shield his face with the Chronicle. But as he turned, he saw the door smoothly shutting.

"NO!" he yelled, throwing himself forward—but the door closed as he hit it, sliding to the floor as another stack slammed dangerously close to him. Breathing hard, he tried to short-circuit the lock again but this time, the door remained stubbornly closed. Cringing back as a chunk of the ceiling crashed mere feet from him, he pressed himself back against the door. "Astrid is going to kill me if I die in here," he said breathlessly. "I mean, I had everything…but I couldn't leave the actual book. It belongs to everyone and…what am I thinking? I am going to die and if I am gone…Drago will win…" He rested his head back against the door.

"FISHLEGS!" he yelled. "If you want to earn a medal and get to look after this book, just about NOW is the time to step up and be awesome." Please.

But the only sound was the ominous creak of the roof as the structure sagged, gave one final, terminal groan…and collapsed…

I stared. It was definitely not what you expect on a holiday and as the grey Bewilderbeast roared again, the formation tightened and the dragons—very definitely under its control—accelerated towards the National Archives. I watched them soar up—and then a trio of Nadders swoop down and attack the building.

The building containing my Hiccup and Fishlegs.

"THUGGORY! Are you seeing this?" I yelled into my com and there was a crackle—before the lieutenant replied.

"Where the Hell have all these dragons come from?" he shouted back.

"Where are you?" I asked, turning and beginning to run down the road.

"At the port—and all of Bludvist's big ships are in," he replied. "Every single one. The twins have tried to get close but they have pretty severe security-men with guns and appallingly bad attitudes.
"I suspect there's your answer," I told him without hesitation. "You could load a lot of dragons on a container ship...and he's been collecting, hatching and training dragons for a long time...all for this..."

"But...can't we stop them?"

"With what?" I asked, seeing the Archives building shudder and pieces of concrete begin to fall out of the roof. As I watched, the entire glass front of the building shattered and rained to the ground in lethal shards. "We all have Trank guns but we'd need considerably larger cartridges..."

"You know, I think it may be time to call for reinforcements!" he suggested.

"Any dragons you call in would just fall under the influence of the grey Bewilderbeast," I told him urgently. "That would be a really bad move..."

"I thought Toothless was an Alpha as well," he said and in that moment, I felt a sudden twinge of worry. "I'm sure he could protect them..."

"Thuggory-what have you and the General been up to?" I asked him, sprinting down the hill. I was running far harder than I should to arrive there in any condition to fight but I was really worried-because I hadn't seen anyone emerge...and Hiccup hadn't commed me. As I sprinted over an intersection, I knew I was almost in range and I suddenly knew what to do, for Hiccup had been training us in all manner of battle tactics...including mimicry... I paused, panting-then flung my head back and gave a very good approximation of a Deadly Nadder screech.

The dragons all paused and their heads snapped round to glare at me.

"Oops!" I said as they turned-and with a resounding roar, they came after me.

A lump of concrete the size of Hookfang landed centimetres from Hiccup's good leg and he tried to curl up further. Half the room had fallen and the place was a fog of dust. The shattering of toughened glass was loud and the remains of the roof were creaking appallingly overhead. He thought he could hear the roar of dragons and could see the thinnest shard of sky through the remains of the ceiling, a stray ray of sunlight piercing the gloom.

But the air was thick with dust as Hiccup coughed and hacked and fought for breath as he hammered on the door-then hauled himself up, eyes stinging and streaming with the dust. He craned to look up-and saw the shapes of dragons through the tiny gap. Coughing, he felt the impact though the door-and then again. Turning round, he felt the door judder-and then it opened a crack. An end of metal poked through and the door was unceremoniously levered open until two meaty hands poked through and dragged the door open a little further. Fishlegs' head poked through.

"Hiccup?" he said and his arm snaked through, grabbing Hiccup's outstretched hand-the other was clamped on the book-and dragging the coughing man through. His legs had just vanished though the door-and then again. Turning round, he felt the door judder-and then it opened a crack. An end of metal poked through and the door was unceremoniously levered open until two meaty hands poked through and dragged the door open a little further. Fishlegs' head poked through.

"Hiccup?" he said and his arm snaked through, grabbing Hiccup's outstretched hand-the other was clamped on the book-and dragging the coughing man through. His legs had just vanished though the gap before the rest of the roof gave way and the tiny space where he had sheltered vanished under a massive slab of concrete. Lying on the creaking floor of the corridor, coughing and heaving, Hiccup found Fishlegs grabbing him and slinging him unceremoniously over his shoulder, the book clamped in his arms. "This entire building is falling down!"

"Really? I really hadn't noticed," Hiccup coughed as they sped through the disintegrating lobby. The smash of glass and an ominous creak sounded as the structure crumbled-but Fishlegs erupted
through the shattered remains of the door, the one-legged Rider still slung over his shoulder. Immediately, the furious roars of Nadders met their ears and Hiccup looked up, eyes wide in shock—and then another roar caused them to pause.

"What was that?" Fishlegs asked in a worried voice as he put Hiccup back on his feet. The book clutched in his arms, he stared in the direction of the roar—and saw the familiar blonde shape of Astrid, her hands cupped around her mouth as she finished roaring.

"Astrid," he coughed. "Her Nadder roar…and the dragons really don't seem to like it…" He looked up in horror as the Nadders all wheeled round—and arrowed at her.

"Oh Thor!" Fishlegs squeaked as he saw the woman's eyes widen and then she saw them. There was a moment when her eyes met theirs…and the she turned to run. Hiccup coughed and then he took a deep breath, stuffing the book under his arm, cupping his hands around his mouth and poured every ounce of energy into an enormous roar.

The effect was spectacular as the Bewilderbeast bellowed a challenge from the Bay and the dragons pulled up, spiralling high into the sky and arrowing back towards the grey shape. Breathing hard, Hiccup stared at the blonde, seeing her eyes widen—but as she turned back, he collapsed to his knees.

oOo

The moment I roared, Fishlegs erupted through the ruined front of the Archives, Hiccup slung over his shoulder and my heart clenched in fear. How was it that idiot could manage to get injured just reading a book? I mean, going to a library is an occupation for the studious, the boring and the most reluctant students…and my fiancé ends up in a dragon attack. The roars of the enraged Nadders dragged me to the present and I turned and planned to lead them away—but Hiccup instantly saw me and wrestled the huge book he had clearly rescued from the Archives before giving his Night Fury roar—a much better approximation of Toothless's than mine was of Stormfly. That certainly got their attention and the Bewilderbeast instantly responded, calling the Nadders back to his swarm. I breathed a small sigh of relief—but not for long because I was haring down to reach Fishlegs and Hiccup.

"What happened?" I demanded as I arrived at them, breathing hard.

"I think he is preparing himself for a challenge," Hiccup said wearily. "He's got all his dragons marshalled to protect him and attack the challenger."

Another, familiar, roar echoed up from the bay and his emerald eyes widened in shock.

"Like that one?" I suggested.

"Toothless!" Hiccup breathed. "Yes-exactly. I mean-what's he doing here?"

"Thuggory—what the Helheim is going on?" I demanded over the com, still breathing hard.

"We thought he may have dragons here so the General sent ours along to support you," he explained as I looked over at Hiccup. He rolled his eyes.

"The reason why we didn't want the dragons anywhere near here was that we suspected Drago had a dragon that could subjugate other dragons and control them," he explained. "We didn't want our dragons anywhere near here because Drago's Bewilderbeast would take them over and we would lose them!"
"But your Night Fury..." Thuggory began.

"I almost lost Toothless to him last time," Hiccup snapped, staggering to his feet.

"Last time?"

"When I escaped from Drago's compound with Myrkr and returned home," he said with forced patience.

"Well-you can speak to him yourself because he just took off like a rocket and is galloping through the streets of Reykjavik towards you..." Thuggory said.

"Okay-listen very carefully," Hiccup said in an angry voice. "Do NOT allow any other dragons out. They must remain locked up until we return and the Bewilderbeast is out of play. Understood?"

"They're trying to get out," Thuggory admitted as Hiccup groaned.

"Keep them locked up if you want any chance of hanging onto them," he said and shifted the book under his arm, cutting the com. He looked at me. "We need transport." I cast around and saw a rather nice SUV which seemed to have the keys in the ignition.

"Will that do?" I asked, pulling the door open. Limping, Hiccup scrambled into the passenger seat with Fishlegs in the back.

"Yes-and I am going to regret this," he sighed. "Head for the harbour-full speed!" I started the engine and shifted into gear.

"Yessir!" I grinned and floored it. Fishlegs squeaked and fumbled for his seatbelt as Hiccup hung on. "You okay?" I asked in a low voice and he nodded.

"Another near death experience for the collection," he sassed. "It isn't a BERK day without almost getting killed twice before lunch."

"No getting killed!" I ordered him sternly. "You are marrying me, Commander Haddock, if it's the last thing you do!"

"Now turned into a scary would-be-Bridezilla," Hiccup commented as I screeched left and sped along the main road while towards our our right, the Bewilderbeast roared and his cloud of dragons rose over him, spiralling and roaring in response-and then they all arrowed away across the town towards the Icelandic Parliament. I gulped.

"STOP!" Hiccup yelled as a black shape bounded up the hill, eyes focussed on the SUV. I screeched to a halt as Toothless took off in one bound and landed on our roof. The car shuddered but Hiccup had unlatched his safety belt and was out, his hands resting gently on the muzzle of the black Night Fury. Toothless's eyes were wide and friendly, his ears pricked and head tilted as he gave a little reassuring croon. "Hey, bud," Hiccup murmured. "Stay with us, okay? Stay with me...

The Bewilderbeast roared and Toothless's head snapped up, his ears quivering and he made a little whirring noise. As we watched, his pupils started to shrink to narrow slits and he started to pull away. But Hiccup just as quickly scrambled up onto the hood and knelt on the roof, his hands pressed to the dragon's blunt snout.

"Toothless," he murmured. "Stay with me, bud. I-I know I haven't been the best Rider...I've let you be locked up and managed to get myself poisoned and let's not even talk about how you lost half your tail saving me from the Skrill...but I love you, bud. You've always been there for me when I..."
have been at my lowest. You've kept me going. You've saved my life. I would die to protect I love
you. You're my best friend, bud-my best friend...

The dragon's eyes fluttered, the pupils flickering between slits and a slightly wider aperture. It was
clear he was fighting an internal battle...but with a little croon, his pupils flicked wide and he gave
his gummy, toothless smile.

"Attaboy," Hiccup breathed in relief. "We good, bud?" Solemnly, Toothless licked him. "And
you're not listening to that bad dragon any more?"

I honestly found my eyes tearing up at his genuine, gentle words. The two had shared so much, had
such a strong bond that he could break through the control that seemed to hold a couple of hundred
dragons in its thrall. And I could hear Fishlegs sniffing behind me so I didn't feel such a complete
soppy idiot.

"That was beautiful," Fishlegs sniffed.

And I knew, in my heart, I was second in his affections, that Toothless would always be his best
friend, his lifeline, his brother. But being second to the Night Fury and even figuring in Hiccup's
affections was good enough for me. He had shown me, over and over, what he would do for me and I wasn't worried...for us, at least. But the cloud of dragons was now
setting about the Icelandic Parliament, ripping the roof apart and flaming at the security guards,
who tried to ward them off with handguns and simple automatic weapons. It could hear the distant
chatter of gunshots amid the roars and explosions and guessed they wouldn't succeed.

"Thuggory-get the dragons out of here," I commanded. "NOW!"

"But we can help..." he protested, seeing what I was.

"No, we can't," I realised. "There are too many dragons and our own dragons would be lost if we
tried to use them against Drago's dragon army. We have to allow the conventional army and
defence forces to protect Iceland while we try to work out how we get out of this."

"But..."

"Get back to the hotel and grab our stuff and then evacuate," Hiccup commanded. "Head for the
airport."

"What will you be doing?" Thuggory asked.

"Just seeing what Drago has planned," Hiccup explained, scrambling down. "Get the others to
safety. We'll meet you at the airport." I looked up at him suspiciously.

"What are you planning, Commander Dragon Boy?" I asked. He slid back into the passenger's seat,
the Night Fury still perched on our roof.

"Let's go and see what the Master of Dragons is up to," he said.

oOo

Bored at ship-watching, Snotlout and the twins had headed back to town for a better view of the
dragon attack and had found themselves with the crowd watching as the Icelandic Parliament was
destroyed by the dragons. Shockingly, there were huge four-winged dragons that had Riders,
blasting fireballs at the building and strategically taking out security guards and the swiftly-
arriving uniformed personnel.
"This is bad," Snotlout announced as another tank was blasted apart by the four-winged dragons. The leader, in a sleek green flight suit marked with the 'Crowned Dragon' logo of Drago's Empire, pointed and his dragon blasted the front of the building, causing half of it to collapse. "These guys look...better than the ones we met in Birmingham."

"These guys look serious," Tuff commented.

"SURRENDER!" the man on the dragon yelled, his precise diction cold and merciless. "We have eliminated your government and your President is our prisoner. Your army are defeated."

The security guards shared a look and threw down their weapons. They had seen their colleagues blasted to pieces or ripped to shreds by the monsters and as the Parliament had been in session, they knew pretty much all of their representatives were dead or gravely injured in the collapsed and burning building. The units of uniformed officers that had come up had been similarly dispatched and the whole area was littered with debris, burning ordnance and dead and dying defenders.

A familiar shape walked forward through the crowd, tall and arrogant and horribly familiar. Dressed in a black suit, his long dreadlocks hanging down over his shoulders and dark, cruel eyes filled with triumph, Drago Bludvist walked forward and surveyed the carnage with complete satisfaction. A quartet of heavily-built bodyguards flanked him as he stalked to the lawn in front of Parliament, now cratered and scorched and then he turned back to the watching crowd, the dragons hovering above the remains of the Parliament and the wreckage of the army units that had tried to stop him. Walking behind him was the shape of Heather, dressed in a black pant suit and carrying a silver briefcase.

"People of Iceland," he announced. "Your government is DEAD! Your army are defeated. And my Fliers and dragons will destroy anyone who tries to oppose me. I am Drago Bludvist-your Ruler! And Iceland-my home, my jewel-is just part of my great Empire that will crush all that opposes it!"

"Oh dear," Ruff muttered.

"You know-I'm really getting to hate this guy," Snotlout muttered, still looking a little green around the eyes.

"I'm more worried about Heather," Ruff murmured, grabbing her brother and and Snotlout by the collar and dragging them backwards. The crowds were all backing away, many deciding to run for the safety of their homes while a smaller number were staying and yelling defiant abuse at the invaders and gamely throwing bottles, rubble and whatever else they could get their hands on.

"Oh, c'mon," Tuff whined. "Can't we just join in a bit? You know how much I love shouting…and rioting…" Ruff hauled him further away.

"Those Dragon Fliers seem to be pretty lethal," she hissed. "And we need to get away before Heather notices us." Snotlout nodded and grabbed Tuff's other arm, helping his twin lift him off the ground and speed up the nearest street, directly back to the hotel. Heather walked forward as Drago surveyed the surrendering security and army officers and flipped her computer open.

"We have penetrated the whole of the Icelandic Government system and subordinated it under your own," she reported. "All systems are locked to your command, As of now, you are the President of Iceland." The leader of the Fliers flapped lower, his eyes sweeping the crowd.

"Maybe they will learn to fear you if you demonstrate your power-Mister President," he suggested and Drago's sallow, scarred face twisted into a cruel sneer. He lifted his remaining right arm, his steel walking stick gleaming in the weak sun. He swung it round and then pointed it at the crowd.
And then he roared.

There was a pause and an answering roar from the Bewilderbeast in the Bay and all the dragons turned to glare at the crowd, they pupils the narrowest of slits. They hovered downwards and then attacked the helpless civilians. The fleeing Riders glanced over their shoulders at the sounds of roars and explosions. There were screams and all the Riders were running now, sprinting up the hill and heading desperately for the street with the hotel on.

"Okay—I definitely hate this guy now," Snotlout puffed as they rounded the corner and panted up the hill.

"Are you…pleased…they've had us running miles?" Ruff panted.

"Ecstatic…" her twin gasped as roared sounded overhead and the four-winged dragons headed back up the hill. "Wonder how H and A are getting on?"

oOo

Driving with a dragon sitting on the roof was pretty difficult because it really threw the centre of balance off. I mean, SUV’s are less stable on corners but with Toothless clamped to the roof, our centre of gravity was all over the place and we nearly tipped over twice: in fact, I realised I would have to drive really carefully while we were heavy one dragon. So I headed for our hotel and pulled up outside.

"I'm getting our bags—and your computer, Babe," I told Hiccup as I switched off the engine. "Stay here with Toothless."

"Because taking him into the hotel would really help matters," Hiccup commented sarcastically.

"Can I…?" Fishlegs asked from the back and I huffed.

"You have four minutes to grab what you can and get out," I told him grumpily. "We've gotta get out of here…and evacuate here before Drago turns his attentions to us!"

He nodded and followed me into the hotel lobby—but everyone was clustered around the television bolted to the wall and I saw the hated shape of Drago, standing boldly in the middle, the camera trained on him. He was speaking rapidly in Icelandic before he switched to English. Fishlegs clouted my shoulder and pointed at Heather and I nodded.

"I am Drago Bludvist!" he announced in his rough, cruel voice. "And as of now, I am the President and Ruler of Iceland, by Right of Conquest! I am Dreki Meistari, the Master of Dragons!" And he gave a cold smile, his arm and staff indicating the the circling cloud of dragons and his Fliers, hovering over the wreckage of the defence forces. "And this is only the first of my possessions. I aim to restore the glory of the Nordic World. Our ancestors were explorers, traders, adventurers, conquerers! Our lands stretched from Russia in the East to the New World in the West, encompassing Iceland, Greenland, Vinland, the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Finland, Ireland and northern Britain. And our new Nordic Empire, Nordica, will claim them all back!"
Fishlegs and I stared at the screen and the words echoed round the silent room. Then the other guests and the staff began muttering and cursing in Icelandic and gesturing at the screen while I ouched Fish's brawny shoulder.

"Grab what you need and meet me down in the car in four minutes," I ordered him and backed away, speeding for the stairs. He nodded and was pressing the button for the elevator as I vanished up. Of course, I was regretting it by the fourth floor, my chest tight and feeling hot and sweaty but I was impatient—always have been—and I knew had to get out of there. So I burst into our room and glanced around, vanishing into the en suite little bathroom and grabbing our washbags and then the couple of items we had unpacked. We had both packed light and hadn't really unpacked following our scare the previous evening in case we had to leave in a hurry. Literally, all I had to do was shove our toiletries in and grab the bags and we were done. Visually checking the room one last time, I ran from the room and sprinted down the stairs, bursting out onto the street where Hiccup was sitting with the window down, chatting to the Night Fury. He smiled at me.

"You look pleased with yourself," he commented and I shook my head, swiftly filling him in.

"Nordica?" he murmured. "That was what those guys said when they tried to kill us—well, me—in Brussels."

"It's a pretty clever name but it means he's given up pretending to be legitimate," I said, drumming the steering wheel impatiently and checking my watch. "How long is Fish going to take?"

"That may not be the biggest problem," Hiccup commented as we saw three shapes sprint wildly up the road, all red and breathless and about one hill from dropping dead from exhaustion. Snotlout and the twins reached the hood of the car and all just collapsed against it.

"Hey…T…" Tuff gasped and slid to the floor.

"Ditto…" Ruff gasped, sliding to sit alongside him. Snotlout look up pathetically.

"My legs…are dropping…off…" he whined.

"Oh, for the love of…" I grumbled and lifted my com. "Thuggory…where are you?"

"Leaving the harbour as we speak," he commented. "The dragons are all Tranked—it was the only way to stop them breaking out. He paused. "We heard Drago's announcement and I commed the Generals. There will be a plane waiting for you at Keflavik."

"We have Toothless," Hiccup pointed out.

"He'll be able to fly with you as well," Thuggory assured him. "The plane will take him as well."

"He won't like it…" Hiccup pointed out.

"Leave. Now!" Thuggory ordered. "What remains of the Icelandic Crisis Response Forces are heading straight for Reykjavik to fight the dragons and you need to be out of there. The UN Security Council is meeting as we speak as are the security ministers of the EU. You cannot let yourselves be captured…"
"Roger," I said and started the engine as Fishlegs emerged from the hotel, holding his bags and scuttling as only he could. He scrambled into the borrowed SUV and grinned, bright red with the effort.

"How did I do?" he asked breathlessly.

"Ten minutes!" I growled. "We're leaving NOW!" The twins scrambled round and managed to clamber into the back seat while Snotlout looked up in horror.

"But my beauty regime…” he whined.

"Do you want to get stuck in the middle of a war?" Hiccup asked him pointedly. He opened his mouth. "Without your dragon," the auburn-haired rider continued.

"Nuff said," Snotlout said and threw himself into the back seat, lying across the others. "Drive on Babe. Get us out of here!"

"Snotlout?" I growled, slamming the car into gear.

"Sorry-Lieutenant Babe, I mean Astrid…” Snotlout said hastily as the twins sniggered and we carefully pulled away. I turned left and we sped along the road, trying to skirt the area around the remains of the Parliament building and heading for the main Highway south towards the airport. The SUV handled like a brick and wasn't helped by being overloaded by Riders and a whole dragon. I could hear the engine struggling and I knew Hiccup could as well-especially when Smidvarg popped his head out of Tuff’s jacket and bit him on the nose. It was as we swept round the intersection and headed for the main road towards Keflavik Airport that Hiccup paused and gestured to a space under a flyover. There was a steady stream of traffic out of the capitol and the road was busy but no one argued, the cars streaming past us as we halted legally and Hiccup turned to me.

"This isn't going to work," he said seriously.

"Oh good-can we throw Snotlout out to hitch?" Ruff sniggered as he moved and elbowed her in the middle.

"Please," Fishlegs added, wrinkling his nose at the lovely view he had of the stocky Rider's posterior.

"What?"

"Snot can stay," Hiccup said, unstrapping his seatbelt. "I'm getting out."

"No way," I vetoed immediately, He turned to me.

"Astrid-I have Toothless," he reminded me.

"And Toothless can't fly," I argued but he quirked a small smug smile.

"Have you looked at him?" he asked and I nodded.

"He looks in good condition-and he isn't wearing his saddle," I pointed out.

"Look closer," he said and I leaned out, scanning the black dragon who cooed happily from his position lying over the roof. His tail flicked by and I glanced at it-and like clouds coalescing into a picture, I suddenly realised what he meant.
"His tail is complete," I murmured and he grinned.

"Yup!" he confirmed snugly.

"WHAT?" Snotlout sounded part-outraged and part incredulous. "Look—that is not possible..."

"Awesome!" Tuff commented.

"How did you do it?" Fishlegs asked excitedly. Hiccup clambered out and handed the Book he had been hugging to the husky Rider.

"A combination of old-fashioned engineering and 3D printing," he told his friend, rubbing Toothless's nose. "It contains an automatic element that enables him to move it along with the other fin and I went black so it looks like his remaining tail fin..." The Night Fury gave a coo as I clambered out as well.

"But why...?" I asked. He walked to me and rested his hands on my shoulders.

"Because I can fly him away and hopefully, Drago's men will be too busy consolidating his power to notice one Night Fury zipping away..."

"In broad daylight," I protested as he cupped my cheeks.

"I promise I will be careful," he said.

"Promise me you'll be safe," I insisted, staring into his mesmerising eyes. He smiled.

"You know I can't promise that," he reminded her. "I'm Hiccup—the best trouble-magnet in the Northern Hemisphere." He leaned forward. "But know this. I can't sing to you like when you brought me back from the darkness. Seriously—it's like a dragon being strangled. So...as a promise I will come back...remember...It's not the same without you. It's essential what you bring. You are deep within all time and space above. I just can't live without you, you're my oxygen supply. I'd drift deadly though this life without your love." I kissed him.

"Babe, that is so romantic," I murmured. He sighed.

"Can't take all the credit," he admitted. "Got it from a song." And then he kissed me again. "And now I'm going to ruin the mood. Snotlout—I need your belt!"

"WHAT? My pants will fall down!"

"Astrid and the twins' belts aren't long enough to act as reins around Toothless's neck and Fish has elasticated trousers," Hiccup explained.

"I still don't believe this will work so...okay," Snotlout said grumpily and rummaged around with his pants, producing a very nice quality leather belt.

"Believe me, this will be no picnic for me either," Hiccup sassed back, grasping the warm object with a grimace. "But needs must." Toothless growled. "Bud—I know...but we need to get into the air. Our friends are too slow with us on board."

"Him on board," Snotlout muttered. Toothless's tail flicked round and managed to slap him across the butt. He yelped as we all tried not to laugh.

"Yeah, he deserved that," Hiccup commented as the dragon reluctantly climbed down onto the ground. Deftly, Hiccup fastened the belt and swung his leg over the dragon's neck. "And I've never
flown you without a saddle so be gentle with me, bud..." Toothless crouched with what could only be described as an evil expression on his scaly face, wagged his butt slightly and rocketed into the air. I could hear Hiccup yell 'Useless Reptile' as they vanished and I started to laugh even as I climbed back into the driver's seat, with Snotlout-holding his pants very firmly-clambering in beside me.

"I don't believe it," he said, glaring at the cloudless sky. "He gets all the cool toys..."

"I think he built the tail himself," I commented as we pulled out, much faster now we were a normal weight. I glanced over, changed lanes and floored it. "Now all we have to hope is that he doesn't get himself captured." The twins peered over their shoulders: the dragons could just be seen circling over the city but there were fortunately no dragons anywhere near us and as we pulled away, suitably anonymous now we had shed our roof ornament, I was checking the satnav and finally, I thumbed the com on.

"Hofferson to Base," I said. There was a pause and the loud voice of General Haddock boomed over the line.

"We've been expecting you to report in," he said, the urgency in his voice palpable. "BERK saw the broadcast as well. The Council are meeting with Director Handler. And we are on Red Alert."

"Good thinking—cause we have no idea what he's planning for us," I commented, overtaking a small family car. They beeped at me.

"What was that?" the General asked.

"Nothing—just overtaking someone in our borrowed SUV with the rest of the team…except Thuggory, who's with the dragons..." I replied.

"Thuggory?"

"Lieutenant Thyssen to the officers, sir," I added. "Apparently it's some public school in-joke. Sorry—why did anyone think bringing dragons to Iceland would be anything other than a suicidal idea?" There was a pause.

"The Colonel thought they could be of help in fighting off Drago…" Stoick Haddock mumbled though I could hear he wasn't wholly convinced.

"And no one ever bothered to read Hiccup's report?" I asked as we swerved past a bus. "He reported that Drago had a dragon that almost controlled Toothless—and did make the other escaped dragons return!" There was a sharp intake of breath.

"Thyssen did say he had needed to tranquillise all the dragons," the General admitted.

"Where are they?" I asked. He sighed.

"We have them in a submarine that is currently accelerating away from the port of Reykjavik," the General revealed. "We know he doesn't have a navy…" I glanced in the rear view mirror at Fishlegs, who had gone pale.

"No, but he has dragons," he blurted. I frowned.

"Tidal Class?" I asked. "But we've only seen Snowy-sorry, Bewilderbeasts—and the Scauldrons…"

"Well there are various options…Submarippers, Seashockers, Shellfire, Thunderdrums…" Fishlegs
explained eagerly.

"Are any of them tactical?" the General asked gruffly.

"Well, the Shellfire has two enormous horns, is 160 feet in size and enormous firepower, the Seashocker has two heads and paralyses its victims with a powerful electrical charge, the Submaripper creates immense vortices that rip prey and ships to shreds and hunt by sensing vibrations in the water..." Fishlegs blurted out, his eyes wide and excited as Snotlout face-palmed loudly.

"So basically if Drago has any one of these our dragons are toast...or possibly parfait..." he snapped. "I could just do with some parfait right about now..."

"Which dragons are on the submarine?" I asked, my heart sinking.

"Hookfang, Barf and Belch and Meatlug," the General confessed. My breath hitched at the thought of our dragons all being cooped up in a submarine, Tranked to stop them breaking out and being lost to Drago's Bewilderbeast.

"Watch them closely," I advised him. "Because we have no idea what Drago has-but he has far more dragons than we realised."

"So he has an Air Force and probably a Navy," General Haddock mused and he hummed. "There will be a transport waiting for you. We put it in place under out NATO partnership when we dispatched you...and it's ready for your use." He paused. "Is Hiccup safe? I don't hear him..." I sighed.

"He's up on Toothless..." I revealed and as I hear him inhale to ask, I smiled. "Somehow, he's able to keep Toothless free of the Bewilderbeast's thrall-don't ask me how, sir-he's Hiccup. That's all I can say..." There was a low chuckle.

"Indeed," Stoick commented. "Tell him to take care, Lieutenant, Haddock out." I floored it and zipped past another two family cars, my eyes fixed on the horizon.

"I always do," I muttered as the twins started to squabble over who was going to hold Smidvarg. "But I doubt he ever listens."

Flying on Toothless without a saddle was awesome and extremely scary, Hiccup realised as he clung on for dear life. He was used to gripping Toothless's neck with his legs and maintaining his position bowed forward to stay aerodynamic but without his mask and helmet, his face was cold and he was squinting against the wind as Toothless flipped. He felt strangely unsafe and he regretted not having his saddle-but he was delighted as the Night Fury looped and rolled without any hesitation, the tail prosthesis responding perfectly.

"Okay, bud-shall we check the airport?" he murmured and the dragon looped round and arrowed southwards, seeing heading down the coastline and rising to see planes still rising from Keflavik Airport over the sea. Then he patted the Night Fury's head.

"Hiccup-can you hear me?" Astrid's voice came over the com and he smiled, leaning forward and flipping the channel open.

"Always, Milady," he replied over the wind. "How are you getting on...?"
"Breaking all the speed limits to get to the airport," she reported. "But the dragons are in a submarine heading out of the Bay and I have a nasty feeling that Drago has some surprises up his sleeves to prevent underwater attack...or escape..."

"You suspect he may have some Tidal Class dragons in the Bay?" he replied, picking up her train of thought.

"Apart from the Bewilderbeast?" she shot back. He chuckled.

"Something meaner, I guess," he said. "What do you think, bud? Shall we go and escort the sub into the open sea?"

"Admittedly, Iceland claims a 200 mile protection zone beyond their coastline but I think Drago won't be keen to sink a sub in his first day on the job..."

"Really? You actually said that?" he asked sarcastically. "Astrid-I think he would consider it a badge of honour to kill a few more enemies. And we know he doesn't value draconic lives any more than he does human. The moment he learns of them, he'll signal the attack. And I'm on just the dragon to find them. Get them to the airport, Milady. I'll make sure the dragons get away!"

"Take care, Babe," she said softly.

"You too," he answered and cut the link. Toothless flicked his ears and gave a little croon. Hiccup sighed. "Yeah-we need to find them first...and how much chance do you think we have of doing that without the Bewilderbeast noticing?" The Night Fury gave a little warble. "Yeah, I thought so as well," he said with a sigh. "Okay, take us down, bud."

They rolled and then swooped down, the whistle of the Night Fury rising as they accelerated down and skirted the surface of the grey-blue sea, icy spray causing Hiccup to blink and Toothless to give his warbling 'laugh'.

"Yeah, hilarious, you useless reptile," Hiccup commented as they skidded the waves, seeing the grey shape across the waters. "See if you can find them, bud." The dragon gave a little rumble of agreement and then drew himself up, Hiccup felt the change as the dragon pouring his energy into his 'special' roar-an echolocation roar that surged through the water. The auburn-haired rider grimaced as he felt the echoes coming back and he could almost 'see' the cylindrical shape almost at the mouth of the Bay, moving fast...and a large shape stationed close to the entrance, the heartbeat obvious to the dragon and rider.

Toothless growled and adjusted his trajectory, aiming to escort the submarine-and his friends-out. But there was a sudden foul stench and the water began to move and swirl.

"Is that...a vortex?" Hiccup murmured and automatically reached for his helmet cam...but he wasn't wearing his helmet. "Fish would love this," he commented as he felt the tug of winds as the whirlpool strengthened and the suction increased.

Toothless roared a challenge and a reply echoed back across the Bay.

"And that happened," Hiccup groaned as the rose up, skirting the tug and making themselves obvious to Drago's dragons. Toothless gave another echo roar and gave a worried croon but Hiccup could detect the fact the sub was being pulled of course as well. "Okay, bud-we need to stop this guy-and fast!" he said urgently, leaning low forward over the Night Fury's neck. They dived down and unleashed a couple of huge plasma blasts straight down the mouth of the vortex. There was a shudder and an explosion of water and the vortex began to falter. Toothless narrowed his eyes and
fired again, causing the column of water to collapse and the vortex to dissipate in a welter of foul gas. Hiccup choked and hacked, almost falling from the dragon and as he held on, coughing against the stench, the whistle and roar of a blast alerted him. Toothless dinked just in time to avoid a huge fireball.

A roar caused Hiccup to snap his head round and see a large red four-winged dragon, its chameleon-like eyes focussed on the black dragon. But Hiccup stiffened as he recognised the shape standing on the creature's shoulders, a thick chain around its neck acting as a set of reins. The man riding the creature was the same man who had led the ambush up by the Cathedral the previous evening and his eyes widened in shock. The man glared at him.

"YOU! How aren't you DEAD?" he shouted. Hiccup felt Toothless backwing and retreated a few yards.

"Why would I want to leave this awesome fun?" he asked, hoping the sub had reached the deeper water and was speeding away.

"And why isn't your dragon under the command of the Alpha?" the Rider yelled his dragon remaining on station opposite Toothless.

"I think he's like me-not very good at following orders," Hiccup replied cheerfully, resting his hand flat on the dragon's head. "Oh-and he's also an Alpha!" Toothless roared and blasted away at the hostile dragon, causing it to swerve to avoid him-and at that moment, Hiccup drove Toothless forward and the rammed the Rider, slamming him free. As he fell towards the waters below, the vortex reappeared and Toothless dived down, skimming the periphery of the vortex and seeing the four-winged dragon scoop his rider up and fire after them Toothless roared as the flames brushed his tail, partially melting the new tail. Hiccup glanced over his shoulder and groaned.

"Every time," he groaned. "Just for once, it would be nice to arrive home with the tail in one piece." Then he headed south, across the bay towards the south. "Come on, bud-we gotta make the plane. I'm not sure how much longer that tail will hold up-and we can't stay here." Going an affirmative warble, Toothless accelerated toward the south.

We made the airport and headed straight for the airside, showing our BERK IDs and driving directly onto the apron and then around to a parking space where a military transport plane was already prepped, the engines running and back ramp down, ready for us. I parked up, grabbed mine and Hiccup's bags and got out, followed by Snotlout, who was still hanging onto his pants, the twins with Smidvarg and Fishlegs with the Book and his several bags.

"Welcome," the RAF crew said, ushering us efficiently up the ramp. "We have orders to take off immediately." I froze.

"But we have one member of our party still to arrive," I argued as the twins scuttled on board, Ruff helping Fishlegs with his luggage which was interesting. The officer sighed.

"Two Generals have expressly ordered us to take off as soon as you arrived," he explained kindly. "I believe your last member can catch up with us?" I paused and stared at him in shock.

"I…how did you know?" I asked him, shocked. The man winked.

"You know we have livestock?" I asked him directly and he nodded—gesturing to the shape of Smidvarg.

"I had noticed," he smiled as we walked up the ramp and I strapped myself in. The rear ramp slowly raised. I took a deep breath and then lifted my com.

"Babe?" I murmured and there was a pause.

"Here." Hiccup sounded strained.

"We're taking off now," I told him urgently. "Military transport. They want to get us out of here before Drago starts looking for us."

"Go," he said. "We'll catch up."

"But what about you?" I asked. "Dragon Boy…"

"Toothless is the fastest dragon," he reminded me. "We'll catch up. I'll lock onto your com. Don't worry—you can't lose me this easily…"

"Better not," I told him firmly as the door closed. The engines roared and we began to move.

"You know—I really prefer being in charge," Snotlout grumbled, tightening his straps as we bounced along the taxiway. I was pretty sure we had priority clearance for we didn't stop, just turned onto the runway and accelerated.

"Do you think T will be able to catch us up?" Tuff asked cheerfully as Smidvarg begged and got a candy bar thrown to him.

"TUFF!" Fishlegs admonished him, appalled. "They aren't supposed to eat chocolate!"

"Really? What happens when they do?" Tuff asked hopefully as Smidvarg barfed copiously and then attacked Tuffnut.

"That!" Fishlegs said smugly. Ruff was immediately helpless with laughter.

"Oh—I am very much hurt!" Tuff wailed as the nose lifted and they all felt the acceleration as the heavy aircraft lifted off.

"Come on, Hiccup—where are you?" I muttered as I gripped my seat. The plane was juddering and Smidvarg was having the draconic equivalent of a sugar rush. After chewing Ruff's braids, he started to mate with Fishlegs's ankle while howling all the time. Without even pausing, the dragon latched onto Snotlout's crotch and began to chew, causing him to yell in pain. Immediately, Ruff grabbed Smidvarg and tried to pull him off, only causing the sergeant to scream even louder in pain. The crew were shocked and sat motionless, eyes wide as the dragon shrieked and attacked Tuffnut again. With a sigh, I shot the white Night Terror and Tuffnut for good measure.

They all started at me in shock.

"What?" I asked. "Ruff—could you please make sure Tuff is strapped in? Fish—please can you put Smidvarg in a cage? Snotlout—I am NOT inspecting your 'crown jewels'. He hasn't broken the fabric of your clothing so you'll just have some bruising. Sit down and strap yourself in. Flight Officer—can we lower the ramp on my command?"

He stared at me as if I had asked him to jump out.
"Um…why?" he managed.

"Because we have the last member of our party to join us," I told him. "What's our heading?"

"Currently bearing 180 and then 145 to head down towards UK airspace," he reported.

"Hiccup-are you on your way?" I murmured into my com.

"Are you in the RAF transport accelerating away from me?" he sassed over the com and I gave a half-laugh, half-gasp of relief.

"Can you catch us?" I asked him in a low voice and he chuckled.

"Even with a slightly melted tail, Toothless is right behind you and closing," he reported.

"Lower the tail ramp!" I ordered and Mays-Winfield grabbed the control, bracing himself and lowering the tail gate-to show the familiar black shape of Toothless flapping gamely along about twenty yards behind our tail. The man stared in shock as Hiccup lifted his head and grinned at me.

"Tell the pilot to remain flying straight please," I ordered the Flight Officer and beckoned Hiccup. I saw him lean forward and speak to Toothless. And then he looked up and winked.

"Roger that," Mays-Winfield told me as I yelled:

"Stand back!" I shouted as Toothless accelerated and bounded onto the ramp then dug his claws in, folding his wings.

"CLOSE!" I yelled but even as the ramp was raising, I was running towards the dragon and Hiccup rubbed his head then swung to face me. I immediately hugged him. The door closed with a clang. His arms squeezed me tightly.

"Miss me?" he asked and I nodded.

"You have no idea," I confirmed.

"The dragons in the sub are out of the bay and into the deep waters," he reported. "He has a Submaripper in the Bay. Toothless and I managed to divert it and allow the sub to get away."

"Snotlout snorted.

"Won't it just go after it?" he asked. Fishlegs shook his head with a pitying look.

"Submarippers are highly territorial," he said as if it was obvious. "And it won't leave its familiar grounds…though they normally leave in deeper waters…but I guess it's under the influence of the Bewilderbeast…and it probably forms an effective protection against unwanted approach to the Port…"

"I also ran into our friend from the Cathedral-the one with the scar who killed Mom," he said seriously, staring into my eyes. "He was flying a four winged dragon…a Singetail, I think…"

"OOOH!" Fishlegs gasped.

"We saw them attack the Parliament building," Ruff added. "Four winged dragons with people crouching or standing on them. They attacked the crowd. They killed quite a lot of them…" I stared at her and Hiccup winced.

"Why is Tuff unconscious?" he asked, trying to process what had happened.
"I shot him after he fed Smidvarg chocolate and he went bonkers," I explained. "Smidvarg, not Tuff because he is already crazy… He was savaging Tuff so I thought it was actually better to Trank them both…" He wrapped his arm around me and I steered him to the seats.

"Probably," he sighed. "But now Drago has an Air Force and Naval Defences…and I think I have a nasty idea what else he can use to threaten those who threaten him. I'll need to check the Book we rescued because I may be able to guess what he's planning." He glanced over to the Night Fury, which had curled up in the centre of the bay, with the Air Force personnel all staring, their jaws dropped.

"We can discuss it with the Generals when we get back," I reassured him as we settled down together. "Is there a problem, officers?" The RAF men shook their heads.

"No, Ma'am!" Mays-Winfield replied hastily. "But is that…a dragon?"

I stared into his face.

"No," I told him sternly. "That is a pet Salamander that we brought along. My friend Tuffnut brought his excitable terrier Smidvarg. We all boarded the aircraft in Keflavik…all six of us…and you saw nothing out of the ordinary. At all."

"Nothing?" the Flight Officer asked me, his eyes fixed on Toothless, who had dropped to sleep, his ears flickering slightly as he gently snored. I nodded.

"Official Secrets Act," I reminded him and leaned against Hiccup. "This is going to be a long flight…" I muttered.

A/N: Lyrics from 'Womankind' from the 1993 album 'Jam' by Little Angels. Track written by Toby Jepson.

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