You're Everything I Want (And Nothing I Can Keep)

by wilderwestqueen (untakenbeepun)

Summary

"Prove it. Bring her along this weekend, and prove it to everyone."

After a little white lie, Hiccup has to do something drastic to avoid embarrassing himself at a family reunion. Lost for any other ideas, Hiccup asks his best friend to pretend to be his girlfriend, just for a day. What could possibly go wrong?

Notes

Also posted on fanfic.net under QueenoftheWilderwest, and on my tumblr, wilderwestqueen!
I've Done Something Stupid

“And it's everything I want,
and nothing I can keep,
behind these metaphors,
I want you literally.”

It started in, of all places, a dress shop, with his cousin.

“Does she want the blue dress or the red one?”

“List says blue.”

Hiccup unhooked a blue dress from a rail and tossed it over the pile of clothes dangling across his arm. He had a bag hooked on both of his little fingers, and was dragging another along with his foot. His cousin, on the other hand, was carrying nothing but a scrap of paper, his arms folded and toes tapping.

“Why are we doing this?”

"Because they asked us to,"

"You remember that day four years ago when there were 18th birthday signs and cups full of vodka in our hands?"

"I didn't do anything like that for my 18th," Hiccup said, absent-mindedly checking the price-tag of another dress on the rack.

"How are we related?"

"Your point?"

"Hiccup," he said. "We're adults. We can do whatever we want. We don't have to be out here doing our parents bidding just because they asked."

Hiccup turned away from the rack and waddled towards the till, still way-laden down with all the bags and clothes, resisting the urge to give a long sigh.

His cousin was a part of the reason he’d moved away from the Isle of Berk.

Hiccup’s voice was all in one tone as he spoke again, "We're here because our parents want us to do something for them and they somehow think it'll be a bonding experience for us and bring us closer, and trust me, it's just as excruciating for me as it is for you, Snotlout, so if you could just take one of these bags and pull your weight for once, we can be out of here as soon as possible."

He'd had been calling his cousin Snot ever since he was a kid. His real name was Scott, but toddler Hiccup hadn't been able to pronounce it properly - it always came out as Snot, and the name had stuck. Hiccup had added the 'lout' after a particularly bad drunken night out, a day he refused to let his cousin forget.

Snotlout wrinkled his nose and scowled, but he bent down and picked up two of the bags that
Hiccup had been shuffling along with his feet.

He paid, and the two of them high-tailed it out of there as quick as possible, neither of them with any particular desire to look at anymore dresses after being there for a good half-an-hour.

"Where now?" Snotlout asked, shifting to the side so that Hiccup could take the list from where he'd lodged it between his arm and side when he'd picked up the bags.

Hiccup scanned the list. "Cake shop."

Snotlout's eyes brightened, a smile appearing on his face for the first time since they'd been out. "Food?" he said hopefully, licking his lips.

"No taste testing. Just got to pick some stuff up," Hiccup said, his attention focused on the list, mentally calculating how long it would take to get all of these items and drop them off home.

"Why do you have to ruin everything?"

"Genetics."

The cake shop was across town, a quaint family owned business that his parents had fallen in love with, and as the two of them entered, a girl behind the counter offered him a wide smile after he'd recited the order.

"So, are these for anyone special?" she said brightly, the same overly polite service she used for everybody.

Hiccup opened his mouth to answer, but Snotlout got in there first. "Fat chance of Hiccup ever finding anyone special. He doesn't understand the meaning of the phrase sex appeal," he said, sparing a wink to the cashier. "Unlike me, of course."

Hiccup glowered at his cousin, mortified, especially when the cashier's customer service smile slipped.

"It's for a family reunion," he said, taking the order from her hands. "Our parents take these things very seriously. And I'm sorry about him, he wasn't raised right."

The comment earned him a punch on the arm later, after the woman at the till had handed over the cakes with an awkward laugh and eyes that were begging for the two of them to leave.

"You totally embarrassed me in there!" Snotlout whined as they wandered down the street.

"You embarrassed yourself. Christ, I know it's been a long time since you've been to the outside world, but do you have to talk to girls like that?" Hiccup said.

Snotlout scoffed. "At least I talk to girls."

"I can talk to girls."

"How come I've never seen you with a girl, then?"

"Because if I wanted to impress a girl, I certainly wouldn't bring her around you," Hiccup said, shifting a bag from one shoulder to another as his arm got tired.

Snotlout grinned. "Yeah, because you know I'd blow them away and they wouldn't be thinking about you anymore, after I was finished with them," he said, lifting up one bicep after another to give them a kiss.
"Wow, you just did that," Hiccup said, his voice all in one tone, "and countless other strangers and I all saw."

"You're just jealous." Snotlout's voice was smug, a triumphant grin on his face.

"Yeah, I'm green with envy."

"That's what I thought."

The errands continued for another hour or so, until they had crossed everything off the list, and were packing up the car ready to go home.

Snotlout reached up to slam the backdoor shut, before darting into the front seat.

"So, are you going stag again?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "It's a family reunion, not prom, Snot."

"You're just saying that because it's embarrassing to admit that you're going to be sitting on your own while everyone couples up," Snotlout said. "I myself am going to be bringing a lovely young lady."

"Your baby sister doesn't count."

Snotlout slammed his hands down on the dashboard. "You're just mad that you're completely incapable of dating anyone, because no girl would ever want to date some loser whose mental age is stuck at eight and whose only friend is a three-legged cat."

That struck a nerve. "How do you know I don't have a girlfriend, huh?"

"Because I know," Snotlout scoffed.

Hiccup knew that he shouldn't let Snotlout get to him, but he'd had to listen to Snotlout's ribbing and teasing all day and he was starting to reach the end of his tether. "Well, where do you think I was last Friday when you wanted to go out drinking?"

"Sitting in your room, eating ice cream and watching Gilmore Girls, just like all lonely single pre-teens do," Snotlout said. "Doesn't prove anything, you're talking bullshit."

"I am not," Hiccup said, his fingers gripping hold of the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were turning a little white.

"Alright then," Snotlout sneered, an unpleasant smile twisting across his face. "If you have do have a girlfriend, which you don't, bring her to the reunion this weekend. Prove it to everyone."

Hiccup scowled. "Fine, I'll bring her. Then you'll see."

"Yeah, I'll see that you're a sad sack that makes up imaginary women just to make himself seem cool."

"And you'll be the one eating your words, when I prove you wrong." Hiccup said through gritted teeth, the car coming to a screeching halt outside of the hotel Snotlout was staying in.

"Fine."

"FINE."
Snotlout slammed the door and stormed off towards the hotel, while Hiccup pressed his face into the steering wheel and fought off the urge to scream.

In retrospect, he should have seen this coming.

Family dinners were the worst.

Standing on the doorstep, his hand hovering over the doorbell, took Hiccup back to day years early when he was still in school, waiting in front of the headmaster’s office after a science experiment had gone too far. In Hiccup’s defence, he hadn’t known that mixing together those specific chemicals was going to cause an explosion so bad it left burn marks on the ceilings. Hiccup still maintained that it was the chemistry teacher’s fault.

He felt like an ant in his mother and father’s home. Hiccup’s family had always been reasonably well off, but after Hiccup had left for university, his father’s business took off and his mother’s books had a hit a new wave of popularity. They’d really come into the money, and boy, did it show; their new house was now a lavish show of trinkets and furniture, the likes of which made Hiccup cringe. It felt to him like everything had an invisible price sticker, too much money to count, and he dreaded to think the dent it would make in his bank account if he ever had to replace anything. The moment he stepped into the house he felt like he was holding his breath, doing his best not to move, because if he did, his clumsiness would step in and he’d be paying for that genuine Persian rug out of his own pocket.

In a lot of ways, Hiccup felt much more at home in the grubby, mould-ridden student flats that he’d hopped between in his years at university. At least then he knew that wasn’t much more that he could do to mess it up.

Hiccup didn’t fit in with his parents’ new lifestyle, and standing in the hallway in his oversized sweater and ripped jeans didn’t do anything to help that.

“Hiccup!” His mother met him with a smile and pulled him into a hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, Mum,” he said. “It’s only been a few weeks, though.”

Her eyes twinkled, as she held his chin to look at his face. “Still too long.”

“I missed you too,” he said, pulling her in for another hug.

His father appears around the doorway when, entering the room in a way only he could, bounding into the room in a way that made everyone turn to look.

“Good to see you, boy,” he said, as he pulled Hiccup in for a tight one-armed hug.

“You too, Dad,” Hiccup said, his voice strained with the weight of his father’s arms.

His mother was flapping a little, waving her arms and guiding them all into the dining room. “Let’s not stand on ceremony, you must be hungry! I’m convinced that you don’t feed yourself, Hiccup, you’re getting skinnier everyday…”

It wasn’t far from the truth. Most days Hiccup was so busy that he just didn’t have time to make proper meals, but he wasn’t going to let his mother know that the only thing he’d eaten that day was a protein bar he’d hastily stuffed into his mouth before he’d left for work. She’d probably
demand that he move back home so that she could feed him properly.

The smell of food wafted into the room from the kitchen, and Hiccup resisted an urge to sigh. It was almost worth the trouble just for the food. For the first course, he let the conversation was over him, only answering with monosyllables while he concentrated on eating as much as possible, letting all talk of this godforsaken family reunion wash all over him.

“We’re going to have to invite everyone, of course. We’ll open up all the guest bedrooms,” Val was saying. “And the whole house needs to be cleaned and decorated.”

Every year, everyone from the Haddock family, every aunt, cousin and friend would fill up his parents’ house for an event that Hiccup was pretty sure was his mother and father’s favourite time of the year. It was the time of the year that they got to show off everything they had, push their event planning skills to the max to top whatever they had done the year before. Every year it was lavish, extravagant and high profile, and as the years went by, Hiccup felt more and more like he wasn’t living up to expectations.

“Oh and did you hear, Stoick? Hiccup’s bringing a date this year!”

“…Wait, what?” Hiccup froze, his fork hovering mid-air between his plate and his mouth.

Val blinked at him, but kept going. “Oh, Scott told me everything, dear, I can’t believe you didn’t tell us!”

“What did Snotlout tell you?” Hiccup said, still frozen in space.

His mother rolled her eyes. “I wish you wouldn’t keep using that nickname, Hiccup.”

“What did Scott tell you?”

“He told us that you were dating someone and that you were going to bring her to the reunion,” Val said, her warm eyes crinkling as she smiled wide.

Hiccup felt a pang in his chest. “Look, Mum, Dad, there’s something I need to tell you…”

“We’re just so happy to see you finally with someone,” Val said, something suddenly very sad in her eyes. “We’ve been so worried about you, Hiccup. You’ve just seemed a little lonely recently, ever since you graduated university, I’ve been worrying that you haven’t been getting out much.”

There was something just so sad in her voice and all of her words were coated with so much relief.

“Yes, son, we’re thrilled to see you getting yourself out there.”

“What’s she like, Hiccup?”

Both of them were looking down at him with the brightest of smiles and for the first time in a while they both looked truly happy with Hiccup – thrilled in fact. His stomach twisted and flopped over.

“She’s… nice. I met her in university, we took a couple of classes together.”

“That’s wonderful,” Val said with a smile, clapping her hands together. “You are going to bring her, aren’t you Hiccup? You won’t leave us in the dark any longer, right?”

A pause. Hiccup sighed.
“Yeah, Mum. I’ll bring her.”

Hiccup spent the hour’s journey back home blaring loud music and ignoring all the speed signs. He parked at his apartment, but instead of going in, he shoved his hands in his pockets and marched down the street.

He didn't even check the time when he opened the door to the bar, slipped onto a bar stool and plonked his head onto the surface.

"Uh, you know we're closing, right?" a female voice said.

"Just give me the strongest thing you have," Hiccup said, as if he hadn't heard her, his voice a little muffled, still pressed onto the bar, doing his best to ignore how sticky it was.

The woman pushed a rag in the bottom of a glass, wiping every last inch clean with the twist of her wrist. "You know I can't do that."

"What's the point in having a bartender for a best friend if she can't let me drown my sorrows in drink?"

"That would make me an enabler."

"I've done something really stupid, Astrid," Hiccup said, lifting his head up so his chin was pressed on the bar and he could look up at her sorrowfully.

She tossed her braid over her shoulder and snorted. "Well, obviously."

"Ha, ha. You're funny," Hiccup said, shoving his face back down on the bar.

"So, come on," Astrid said, putting down the glass and the rag and shifting her weight so that she could lean on the side of the bar. "So, what little hiccup have you had now?"

Her eyes twinkled under the bar lights, a cheeky smile quirking at her lips like she thought she was the funniest person in the world.

"You're still not funny."

One of Astrid's colleagues came out of a back door, pulling on a jacket and checking their pockets for keys. "You alright to lock up tonight, Astrid?" she asked as she passed by. She barely spared Hiccup a second glance. "Hi, Hiccup."

"Yeah, no problem. I just gotta deal with a situation here first," she said, reaching out a finger to prod Hiccup in the head, earning her an indignant squeak in response.

Her co-worker eyed Hiccup knowingly. "I can see that. Well, have fun."

She swept out of the door, turning the 'closed' sign around as she passed, leaving Hiccup and Astrid alone in the bar.

"Why are you not feeding me alcohol?" Hiccup muttered, still face down.

"Not worth getting fired when the manager finds missing stock."

"I didn't say I wasn't going to pay for it."
"Well, that would be sweet, but would you look at that?" Astrid said, a grin on her face as she pointed up towards the clock. "My shift's over. I don't have to get you anything."

"Pleeeeeease."

"Tell you what," Astrid said, "if you let me lock up, we can go home, order pizza and you can tell me all about this colossal mess up of yours."

"Can it have pineapple on it?"

Astrid wrinkled her nose. "Whatever you want, you sick pizza freak."

She grabbed the keys from the back room, pulled on her coat and made sure all the lights were off, and then dragged Hiccup up off his stool, out the door and into her car.

He didn't start talking until he had pizza in his hands.

"Why won't you just tell me?" she'd asked, rolling her eyes.

"I want to make sure you weren't lying about the pineapple," he said with a pout, and she'd given the most exasperated sigh.

"So, I was out with Snotlout," he began, his voice muffled by a mouth full of pizza. "My cousin. The one I told you about before."

"Oh, dear."

"Yes, oh dear." Hiccup scowled. "We were doing errands for the reunion for Mum and Dad because they were too busy to do it themselves. So, he starts ragging on me about my love life and it's getting worse and worse, and I'm just thinking about how I want him to shut up, so my stupid mouth thinks the best thing to do is blurt out that I have a girlfriend."

"Oh," Astrid said, picking pieces of pineapple off the pizza and flicking them onto the pizza box.

"So, of course, he calls bullshit, so I tell him that he doesn't know what he's talking about. And then he says that I've got to prove it by bringing her to the reunion, so now I'm going to look like a fool in front of everybody," Hiccup said, grumpily taking another bite. "Which would be fine, only it gets worse."

"Yeah, your hiccups have a way of doing that," Astrid commented.

Hiccup glared at her. "So anyway," he said sharply, ignoring her jibe. "I'm going to a family meal with my parents, and my mum starts talking about how she's so thrilled that I'm finally bringing a date to one of these family events, because Snotlout had told her everything."

Astrid was starting to catch on now, hiding her smile behind her hand.

"And for the first time in ever, my parents look happy, like, really happy. Like I'm not just a big disappointment anymore, and my mum's looking at me with these really, really sad eyes - seriously, like she was about to cry - talking about how she's so glad that I've found someone and that she's been so worried that I've been lonely, and she asks me if I'm definitely bringing her to the reunion."

Astrid licked sauce off her fingers and raised an eyebrow. "...So, you said?"

"So I said, sure Mum, I'll definitely bring her."
Then there was a silence.

"Well, you were right," Astrid said.

"About what?"

"That was stupid."

Hiccup groaned and slid onto the floor, face down again.

"Oh, no, we are not doing this again," Astrid said, prodding Hiccup in the side. "Stop it, I'm tired of talking to the back of your head."

Hiccup rolled over onto his front, staring up at Astrid's ceiling lights, his vision blurring a little, everything turning into unfocused shapes.

"What am I going to do?"

Astrid shrugged. "Tell the truth?"

Hiccup didn't say anything, he just turned his head and narrowed his eyes at her.

Astrid pushed the pizza box out of the way and joined him on the floor, lying down and resting her hands on top of her stomach.

Hiccup breathed out in a sigh. "...It's not just Snotlout's teasing. I can cope with that, and if the only thing I had to deal with on that weekend was Snotlout's jeering, I mean, it'd be horrible, but I could deal with it, you know?"

"Yeah," Astrid said, softly. "I get it."

"So, now I just don't know what to do."

Astrid heaved herself up and off the floor, opening a cupboard and pulling out a blanket. "What you do is, you put some stupid film on, you laugh at the stupid special effects, you wrap a blanket around yourself, and you don't think about it until you wake up in the morning."

She waved the blanket at him, and he took it with a grin. "You know you're the best, right?" he said.

"Yeah," Astrid said, with a grin. "I know."

Hiccup woke with a crick in his neck on Astrid's sofa, his eyes aching with weariness. They had stayed up very late the night before, just chilling out and talking and watching films. Astrid had eventually gone off to her own bed, leaving Hiccup alone on the sofa.
Still wrapped in the blanket, he stood up and waddled towards the kitchen, where Astrid was already dressed, and cooking something on the stove.

"Morning," she said when she noticed him in the doorway. "You sleep well?"

"Yeah," he said. He wasn't looking at her, just squinting at the frying pan. "Just wondering, are you cooking?"

"...Yeah?"

Hiccup untangled himself from the blanket, folding it up and leaving it on one of the kitchen chairs. Then he went over to the stove and took the frying pan and spatula from Astrid's hands and took over.

"What are you doing?" she said, her voice sounding amused rather than annoyed.

"Trust me, it's for the best."

Astrid raised her hands in surrender, and went to sit at the table, letting Hiccup work on breakfast, picturing in her mind's eye the last time she'd tried to make breakfast.

He was right. It was for the best.

It wasn't long before the eggs were cooked - fried to perfection, if Hiccup said so himself. He delivered two to Astrid's plate before turning back to do a few for himself.

As he turned back to put a few on his own plate, something about Astrid caught his eye. He watched as she tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. Then he looked down at her plate, and at the pan in his hands.

And then he got an idea.
They went out for coffee after breakfast.

In their university days, the two of them had hopped between as many different coffee shops in town as they could, trying to find the best one possible. It took their whole first year of exploring every inch of the town to find the one they were most happy with. They’d found it on the last day of first year, the two of them on a high after finishing their exams, running around the city to try and see everything they hadn’t seen already before they left for the summer. It was a small place, and unless you knew it was there or happened to stumble upon it by accident, you wouldn’t have found it. It had large sofas with plush cushions, the best coffee and some of the friendliest people working there, and in the coming years, it had quickly become one of Hiccup and Astrid's most frequented place in town, besides the bar that Astrid worked at.

They both ordered a coffee and claimed ownership of the window seat as they always did, looking out into the street outside, sinking into the seats while steam from the coffee swirled into the air.

"So I had this idea," Hiccup said, drumming his fingers up and down on his mug.

Astrid took a sip from hers. "Dangerous," she remarked.

"I was thinking about this reunion business," he said, ignoring her comment.

"...And?"

"...And I was thinking, well maybe, what if we pretended that we were a couple?"

Astrid choked on her drink. She coughed for a little while, batton a hand against her chest as she laid her mug down on the table and stared at Hiccup with wide eyes. "Hiccup, when I told you to sleep on it, I didn’t mean for that to be your solution."

"I know, I know, I was just thinking that... y’know we’re friends, we know each other well enough that it wouldn’t, y’know, mess anything up and actually you know what, forget it, it’s a terrible idea," he gabbled, slinging the mug back onto the table, burying his head in his hands, sinking back into the sofa.

"I know, I was just thinking that... it would only be for the weekend... that we’d be able to shut Snotlout up, and it would make my Mum happy, and then... then if she asks about it, I can just say that it didn’t work out, she can’t be too heartbroken about that, right?" His voice fizzled away, and he stared down at his cup. Astrid was suddenly very hard to look at.

"Hiccup..." Astrid said, still staring wide-eyed at him, frozen in space. "This is mad, you know that, right?"

Hiccup sighed, and looked back down at his coffee. “I just thought – y’know we’re friends, we know each other well enough that it wouldn’t, y’know, mess anything up and actually you know what, forget it, it’s a terrible idea,” he gabbled, slinging the mug back onto the table, burying his head in his hands, sinking back into the sofa.

Astrid stared at him for a moment, eyebrows raised. “I feel like I just watched a car crash of a thought process,” she said. “Horrifying, brutal, and somehow I just can’t look away."

“Ha, ha,” Hiccup said, rolling his eyes and sweeping his mug into his hands and taking a long swig.

Astrid let out a laugh and shoved him gently in the shoulder. “I mean, c’mon, Hiccup,” she said,
“There’s got to be a simpler solution to this.”

A few moments passed, and they both focused their attention on their drinks.

“In any case, wouldn’t your parents already know who I am?” she asked, breaking the silence between them.

He fiddled with the handle of the mug and didn’t speak for a few seconds before looking up at her again. “I’ve never really told them about you.”

Astrid blinked. “You haven’t? Not ever?”

“Maybe in passing. But not, like, by name.”

Astrid stared at him, her eyebrows raised.

“Don’t like to talk about my life to them,” he muttered, waving a hand in front of his face. “Gives them more to criticise.”

She said nothing at that, and Hiccup shook his head. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It was stupid idea. I’ll think of something else.”

She wiped her face with a napkin and threaded her fingers through the coffee mug again with one hand, the other pulling at a loose strand of hair that had escaped from her braid. A few moments passed while she twirled her finger around the strand of hair, her gaze fixed down at her drink.

“What if you didn’t go?” she suggested, tilting her head back up to look at him again.

“I can’t just not go,” Hiccup said. "It's my parents' favourite day of the year. They'd be so upset if they thought I didn't want to go.”

“What if you couldn’t go? Faked sick, or something?”

He absent-mindedly swirled his finger around a pool of spilt milk on the table, making patterns across the wood. "Wouldn't work,” he said. "They'd know. I never got away with anything like that in school."

Astrid sighed, and shifted back to relax into the sofa, closing her eyes. "We'll think of something." Hiccup’s eyes flickered over towards her and a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Her head was tilted up over the back of the sofa, her face raised towards the ceiling. Her fingers drummed on the sides of the mug resting in her lap, before she opened her eyes and tilted her head over towards him, a grin on her face.

“What about a freak weather accident?” she said.

Hiccup let out a laugh. “I’m not sure I can control that.”

“Eh, you never know,” Astrid said, waving a hand in front of her face. “It’s an option we can’t rule out.”

Hiccup grinned. He couldn't help but notice how Astrid had been using 'we' every time she discussed solving Hiccup's problems; more and more, Hiccup was feeling very lucky to have Astrid Hofferson as his best friend.
His apartment felt cold and empty when he finally went home. He'd left very early in the morning the day before, and had not come back since, and somehow it had felt like he'd been gone for weeks, not just for a night. When he opened the door, his cat was on the floor at his feet, mewing at him indignantly.

"Yes, bud, I know," Hiccup mumbled, pulling his coat and shoes off and dumping them into a heap on the floor.

He dumped a blob of cat food into his bowl and put it on the floor for him to eat.

Exhausted and done with the whole day, Hiccup dropped onto the floor beside him, arms splayed out. "It's been a ridiculous day," he said, when the cat climbed up onto him and made his home on the stomach. Hiccup resigned himself to not being able to leave until the cat saw fit. He scratched him behind the ears, earning a few satisfied purrs.

"Sorry for leaving for so long, Toothless," he mumbled as he stroked the cat. "I've just made a big mess for myself."

Toothless seemed entirely uninterested in anything Hiccup had to say, just glaring up at Hiccup with cold, green eyes when he stopped stroking.

Hiccup sighed and resumed running his fingers through the cat's fur.

"Hey, bud, do you want to be my girlfriend?" he asked hopefully, lifting his head up and grinning down at the cat.

Toothless stared at Hiccup for a few moments, and then stood up, jumped off of his chest and stalked into the kitchen, leaving Hiccup alone on the floor.

"Figures," Hiccup muttered, dropping his head back down and closing his eyes.

He didn't find a solution to his problem. No matter how many ways he spun it around in his head, no matter how many angles he looked at, he couldn't find anything that would get him out of the mess he'd got himself into. More often than not, he found himself in the bar Astrid worked in, sitting at the same spot behind the bar while she fed him drink after drink, until she refused to give him anymore and demanded that he go home.

On the forth night, after his fifth drink, Astrid clicked her tongue against her teeth and rolled her eyes.

"Trust me, Hiccup, this problem isn't going to get any easier to solve the more alcohol you pour down your throat," she muttered, her fingers drumming against the bar top.

"Maybe I'll die before then," Hiccup said, morosely clutching onto the glass she'd been refilling for him with a pitying look.

She frowned. "Don't tempt fate," she said, pulling the glass out of his hands. "I think you've had enough of this."

Hiccup knew better than to try and protest, though he glared at Astrid and stared at the glass longingly as he watched her pour it down the sink.
"Just tell the truth," Astrid said, sucking in a breath and slinging the empty glass into the sink. "Your cousin will make fun of you. Your parents might be disappointed. They'll get over it."

Hiccup gave a long sigh and propped his chin up on his folded arms. "I'll tell them. I'll tell them tomorrow, and then they won't be upset on the day."

"Good," Astrid said, taking a breath out and turning away from him to run a rag across the dirty glasses. "Good plan."

He resolved that he would tell his parents the next time they dragged him over to get a good meal into him. He’d come clean, let them know that he’d lied, he’d let them be upset, let them get out their frustrations, and then that would be the end of it.

But he appeared at Astrid's door later, his face crestfallen and sheepish as he slipped into her flat.

"I couldn't do it," he admitted, his voice quiet. "I just couldn't do it to them."

Astrid sighed and stood to the side to let Hiccup into the flat, watching him kick his shoes off and slump onto her sofa, his chin all but resting on his chest.

She lifted her head to the heavens and resisted the urge to let out another sigh. “This is getting out of hand,” she mumbled, more to herself than anyone else.

But then she took another look at Hiccup on the sofa, lying still and defeated, and her face softened. "Right," she said, squaring her shoulders and clapping her hands together. Hiccup jumped at the sound, his eyes flickering up towards her. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do this right."

Hiccup's head jerked up. "What?" His voice was quiet.

"We're going to need to get our story straight, and make sure both of us know exactly how we met and how we got together," she said, her tone bossy and full of business. "If we're going to do this ridiculous plan of yours, we're going to do it properly."

"Really? You'd do that for me?" Hiccup said, slowly slipping up and off the sofa onto his feet.

"Yeah. It's only for the weekend, right?"

"Of course," Hiccup said, quickly. "Only for the weekend, and after that I'll find some excuse. I'll tell everyone it just didn't work out, or something."

Astrid found herself a little taken aback when Hiccup threw his arms around her, and it took her a few seconds to respond, threading her arms through his and leaning into the hug.

"Thank you," he mumbled. "I owe you so much."

“Uh, no problem, Hiccup,” she said, raising one eyebrow as she patted him on the back.

She hadn't realised until that moment how much this had meant to him.

"I think it's best if we keep most of the backstory the same," Astrid said, jotting things down in a notebook. "We met in university, we had a lot of the same classes together and we became friends. The only place it needs to differ is in the romance zone."
Hiccup nodded, leaning over her shoulder to look at what she'd written.

They were sitting in their coffee shop, nursing drinks as they discussed how they were going to approach the coming weekend. If there was one thing Hiccup knew about her, it was that Astrid Hofferson didn't do anything by halves - if she was going to do this, she was going to make sure that the two of them were as prepared as they could possibly be.

"How about - we drifted away after graduation when we both got jobs and moved on to different things. Then we happened to run into each other, got to know each other all over again and started to date," Hiccup said.

"That's good," Astrid said, scribbling it down. "How long have we been together?"

Hiccup swirled his drink around thoughtfully. "Not long, I reckon. We've only been dating for a few months, and that's why we didn't tell anyone."

"Because we wanted to make sure it was going somewhere before we got everyone all excited about it?" Astrid added, and Hiccup nodded.

"We should probably learn some basic things about each other in case anyone decides to quiz us," she said.

"That's easy, we already know the basic stuff," Hiccup said. "Like, your name is Astrid Marie Hofferson, you were born on the fifth of April, your favourite colour is blue and you could drink anyone under the table."

Astrid blinked at him, and for a moment all she did was stare. And then she said, "Damn. I should be getting you to write my dating profiles."

"Have many of those?"

"A few," she said. "Anyway, I could do the same for you. You're Hiccup Haddock, you have the silliest name of anyone in England, you were born on 29th of February which technically makes you about six years old, your favourite colour is green and you like cats more than you like humans."

"Well, jeez, that about sums me up," Hiccup said, deadpan.

"You work as an artist, it doesn't pay very well, but you do it anyway because you like it so much. You like the way you can create something out of nothing, and you'd never throw that away for a 'real job'," she continued, her voice taking on a much more serious tone. "You saved a three-legged cat from being put down because you loved him so much you couldn’t bear to see him go and you're just about the kindest person anyone could ever meet, but you'd never let anyone know that."

There was a moment of quiet, as the two of them shared a long look, Hiccup scratching the back of his head and shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"Wow," he said after a while. "You're really selling this."

"I told you we were going to do this properly."

Their eyes were still locked together, and for a few moments, they were staring at each other intensely. Hiccup was the first to look away, swallowing and staring down at his drink.

“So,” Astrid said, tapping her hands on her legs, “what was our first date?”
Hiccup thought about it for a moment. “Dinner and a movie?”

“Classic. What kind of dinner?”

“Fancy restaurant?” Hiccup offered. “So, I took you to see a film and then together we went to the Ivy, I paid for everything, I swept you off your feet—”

Astrid cocked an eyebrow. “Oh you did, did you?” she said, a smirk twisting at her lips. “Wouldn’t have guessed you were the kind of guy who enjoys dressing up.”

“Well, maybe I’m full of surprises,” Hiccup said. “Why, what would you have thought?”

She tilted her head to the side, as if appraising him carefully. “Pyjama shorts, Netflix and pineapple pizza. Am I right?”

Hiccup scowled. “Okay, maybe I’m not the dressing up kind of guy, but you could at least try and make me sound a little bit romantic.”

“But what about believability?” she said, a grin spreading across her face.

Hiccup hit her with one of the sofa cushions.

By the time Astrid had to get up to leave for work, the two of them could recount every detail of how they met and their first, second and third date as if they had actually happened. They were as sure of their fabricated relationship as if it was their own life, and the pair could answer any get-to-know-me quiz about the other in the blink of an eye, though Hiccup had found it wasn’t much of a feat, because as Astrid was telling him everything, he realised he already knew all of the answers.

Two nights before the reunion weekend, Hiccup’s phone rang. He’d been cooking at the time, his hands occupied with a frying pan and a spatula, oil sizzling away. Toothless sat on the floor by his feet, looking up at Hiccup with big green eyes while licking his paws.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes down at the cat. “I’ll get you the good kibble if you answer it,” he said. Toothless mewed reproachfully, gave his paw one last lick and then turned and left the room.

“Typical,” Hiccup mumbled, turning down the stove, wiping his hands on a tea-cloth and picking up his phone.

"What am I wearing?" Astrid said, in lieu of a hello.

"...Is this some kind of test?"

He heard Astrid scoff the other side of the phone. "What am I wearing to the reunion, dummy?"

"Oh," Hiccup said. "I don't know. It's up to you?"

In that moment he swore that he could hear her rolling her eyes. "I mean that we never talked about what kind of event it was. Like, if my family was going to have a reunion, we’d all show up in t-shirts and shorts."

"It won't be like that. Um, smart but casual?" Hiccup offered, passing the phone between his
hands and balancing it between his ear and shoulder. "My parents usually dress nice, but it's not so... posh, I guess."

"Well, thank you for that very enlightening description," Astrid said. "I'm so glad that you could help."

"It really doesn't matter what you wear."

"Yeah, but I'm trying to make a good impression on your parents, right?"

A pause. "You want to make a good impression on my parents?"

"I thought that was the whole point of this."

Hiccup grinned. "You'll impress my parents just by showing up."

"Guess I'll show up naked, then."

Hiccup’s heart skipped a beat. She was trying to fluster him - but it wasn't going to work. Two people could play at that game.

"That'll definitely make a good impression," Hiccup said.

There was silence on the other side of the phone and Hiccup revelled in the moment - he’d won.

"Whatever, Hiccup," she said. "I'll find something. See you Saturday."

"I'll pick you up."

"Later, fake-boyfriend," she said, and he could hear the smile in her voice through the phone.

"Bye, fake-girlfriend."

He pressed end-call and went back to cooking, finding himself unable to keep a smile from his face.

He was outside her door early on Saturday morning, ready for the drive to his parent's house. His body has screamed when he’d tried to get out of bed that early on a weekend, and he’d thrown his alarm clock across the room before managing to drag himself out of bed and into his only set of nice clothes.

"You can't come in," Astrid said. She’d slid the door open just a crack and poked her nose out to tell him that after he’d knocked, before promptly closing the door again. "I'm not ready yet!" she yelled, from behind the door.

"You can't be serious," Hiccup said, and tried to push the door open, only for her to push it shut again into his hands. "C'mon, Astrid just let me in."

"You'll compromise a delicate situation!" he heard her call.

"What are you even doing?"

"Trying to look nice."
Hiccup pushed the door open a crack. "But you always look nice."

He heard her sigh, and then the door creaked as she pulled it open. She had a bobby pin in her mouth, and she tilted her head, gesturing him into the room.

Her flat was a mess. There were clothes littered all over the floor, dumped into crumpled piles. From the way it was lying haphazardly across the rug, it looked like she’d had a war with the hair straightener, discarded along with numerous brushes and combs.

"Well, this is disturbing," Hiccup muttered as he laid his bag over the side of a chair.

"If you think this is disturbing, then don't look in the bathroom," Astrid said, standing by the mirror and sliding the bobby pin into her hair. She tilted her head this way and that, trying to look at her reflection from all different angles. "It's way worse."

"Why all the fuss?"

"Trying to look nice, like I said."

"By making a mess of your room?" Hiccup said, his gaze hovering around the signs of destruction all across her flat.

"The room had it coming," she said, before turning to face him, her arms outstretched to the side. "I'm done, what do you think? Does it look okay?"

Hiccup looked at her and stopped short. He knew his best friend was pretty, he wasn't blind, but this was one of those moments that made him stop and gape a little.

"I've never seen your hair in a bun before," Hiccup said, after he'd remembered how to speak.

Astrid's hair was twisted around the back of her head, plaits coiling around like a golden crown. It made her face rounder somehow, and drew attention to her eyes.

"That's because I never do them. I had to watch like, eight, YouTube tutorials," she said with a grin. "And I don't think I've seen you in anything but ripped jeans and sweaters before."

Hiccup was wearing a light blue button down shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

"And we match," Astrid pointed out, gesturing to his shirt and her blue dress. "Ugh. Everyone's going to think we did it on purpose."

"...Won't that be a good thing?"

"We want to look like a couple, Hiccup, but not that kind of couple," she said, wrinkling her nose.

Hiccup laughed. "I'm sure no one would dream of misjudging your character Astrid, or mistaking what kind of person you'd be in a relationship," he said. "Now, shall we go, my dear?"

She scowled at the last bit, just like he knew she would, but she linked her arm through his when he offered it, and together the two of them left the apartment. Hiccup couldn’t help but notice how warm Astrid’s bare skin was against his, but he chalked it down to the early morning weather. It had been cold outside.

It was an hour's drive to his parents’ home. He liked the distance; the drive was short enough to see his parents as often as he liked, but also long enough to avoid seeing them. It was also a city over, which made it unlikely that he might run into his parents accidentally - god forbid they ever
found that his usual haunt was the local bar. Hiccup shuddered at the thought of the lecture they would give him if they found out how often he had a drink in his hands.

Astrid put her feet on the dashboard five minutes into the journey, ignoring Hiccup's protests.

"You're going to make it dirty," he whined.

She looked pointedly at Hiccup, slid her feet back down onto the floor, kicked off her sandals, and put her bare feet straight back up onto the dashboard. Hiccup scowled.

"So, tell me more about your parents," she said. "I need all the intel."

"You make it sound like we're going to we're going into battle," Hiccup said, his eyes on the road, but a smile threatening to emerge from his lips.

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Well, from what I've heard you say about all them before, we just might be."

"They're not that bad, they're just... overbearing, sometimes."

"Aren't everybody's parents?"

"They're worse," Hiccup said. "I just feel like... they have a strong sense of who they are, you know? And a strong sense of what they want the Haddock family to be. It's hard to live up to."

Astrid nodded and stayed quiet.

"Sometimes I feel like they wanted something different for me. Like they expected something more from me," he said.

"More?"

"You know, earning more. Having a better apartment. Finding someone to spend the rest of my life with," Hiccup said, his breath hitching on the last one.

Astrid blinked. "You're only 23."

"They don't see it that way," Hiccup explained. "All they see is time ticking away."

"What are their names?"

"Stoick and Val."

There was quiet in the car of again, the conversation lulling, leaving the just the sound of the car engine and the occasionally bird tweeting.

"Okay, I've got to ask," Astrid said, after a while. "I wasn't going to but I can't not."

"What?" Hiccup said, raising an eyebrow.

"Does everybody in your family have a super weird name? I mean, Stoick. Val. Hiccup," she said teasingly, her lips quirking into a smile.

Hiccup kept his eyes on the road, concentrating on steering. "Just a family thing, I guess. I think I was named after someone in a book? I'm not sure."

Astrid grinned, her eyes glittering. "Or maybe it was just a hiccup with the birth certificate."
"Okay, you have got to stop with the hiccup jokes."

"Not while there's breath in my body."
“We have to go in at some point.”

Astrid and Hiccup sat forward in their seats, Astrid’s chin resting atop her arms that were slumped across the dashboard. Hiccup’s face was pressed on the steering wheel, and neither of them wanted to move. His parents’ home seemed to tower up above them, a mass of brown brick and arch windows, ivy snaking up the walls and tangling with the drainpipes.

Astrid had freaked out when they’d trundled up the long drive, gravel crunching under the wheel of the car.

“My God, Hiccup, you could have warned me,” she’d muttered, snapping her legs down off the dashboard and stuffing her bare feet back into her sandals, hurriedly trying to fasten the buckles. “That’s not a house, that’s a mansion. It looks like one of those places they hire out for tourists to visit so they can poke at old Victorian furniture and pretend to be cultured.”

Hiccup laughed, keeping his eyes on the road as he followed the lane and the house got closer and closer. “I don’t think they actually have any Victorian furniture.”

“I didn’t say they did, I just said it looked like they might,” she said.

At that point, he’d driven up to the house, slotting the car in the available space and parked. Neither of them had made any motion of leaving.

“I feel so underdressed,” Astrid mumbled, her voice slightly muffled. She’d buried her head into her arms at this point. “I feel like they’re going to yell at me for my posture or make me eat caviar. I’m not going to be made to eat caviar, am I?”

Hiccup snorted, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “No caviar, I promise. You know there’s no reason to be nervous, right?”

“I’m not nervous,” she said, blowing her fringe out of her face. “Or at least, I wasn’t until I saw that house.”

“You know it doesn’t really matter if you impress my parents or not, right?” Hiccup said, raising an amused eyebrow.

Astrid made a ‘humph’ sound, turning her head away from him and looking out towards the house. In his mind’s eye, Hiccup could picture Astrid’s flat, drowning in discarded clothes and bobby pins, and he had a feeling that Astrid’s need to impress people was going to come into play no matter what he said.

A few moments passed, both of them waiting for the other to move.

“Hey, is it too late to fake sick?” Astrid said, twisting back around to look at him.

“Probably,” Hiccup said. “Especially as they’ve probably got their noses pressed up to the nearest window waiting to get the first glimpse of you.”

“You think?”
He nodded. “I bet they open the door before we even make it to the porch.”

“Oh,” Astrid said, the word coming out in one long sigh. “I guess we better get out, then.”

The pair left the car, Astrid slipping out and slamming the door shut before Hiccup could hurry round and open the door for her.

As they made their way towards the porch, Astrid yanked at his arm. “Quick, put your arm around my waist.”

Hiccup stumbled over towards her, hovering while he tried to process what she’d just said. “What?”

“My waist, Hiccup,” she hissed. “We’ve got to look like a couple, remember?”

He put a tentative arm on her side, his hand barely brushing the fabric of her dress. His fingers froze in place. It felt wrong to be this close to her, like he’d crossed an invisible line - though she didn’t seem to care, judging by the way she’d rolled her eyes and moved his hand closer to her.

He didn’t have time to dwell on it though, because as they got closer to the house, the front door burst open.

Hiccup barely had enough time to shoot Astrid a look before his mother was pulling him into a hug and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Hiccup, darling, we thought you’d never get here, we were waiting for ages-” Val said without taking a breath, ushering the two of them into the house.

“Mum,” Hiccup said, stopping Val in her tracks. He put his arm back around Astrid’s waist, bringing her forward. “This is Astrid Hofferson.”

She stepped towards Hiccup’s mother, standing straight with a smile on her face, all trace of nerves gone. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Haddock, I’ve heard so much about you,” she said, reaching out a hand for Hiccup’s mother to shake.

"I wish I could say the same about you," Val said, offering Astrid a warm smile. "You've been quite an elusive topic in this house - Hiccup hasn't told us much at all. Oh, and please call me Val, dear."

She lead the pair of them into the living room, and Hiccup couldn't help but notice how Astrid kept sneaking glances around the place, staring up at the high ceilings and mahogany furniture. She sat primly on the sofa, quite still. While Val was occupied in another room, trying to find Hiccup’s father, Astrid leaned in towards him.

“The floors are made of marble!” she muttered into his ear.

“Yes, and they have Persian rugs,” Hiccup said, dryly. “Try not to think about it.”

Hiccup adjusted himself into a more comfortable sitting position, his fingers accidentally brushing Astrid’s, his skin sparking at the touch. Astrid’s eyes widened a little, and the pair shot each other a look before their eyes darted away, Hiccup snatching his hand away to scratch the back of his head.

"Stoick!" they heard Val call from the other room. "Come and meet Astrid!"

Hiccup’s father entered the room with a sense of grandeur, and as always, Hiccup felt a little like
there should have been some kind of fanfare as he came through the door. The way he moved commanded attention and he filled up space in a way that Hiccup never could; even if it had been crowded, Stoick would have been impossible to ignore.

Astrid rose to her feet, and with the same polite smile she'd been using morning – the same smile, Hiccup noticed, that she used for customers – offered her hand out for him to shake.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," she said, as his hand gripped hers and shook it with enough force to remove her arm from its socket.

"Call me Stoick, please," he said. "Wonderful to meet you, lass. You're certainly a beautiful young lady, my Hiccup's a very lucky man."

"Ah, thank you," Astrid spluttered and ducked her head, her cheeks turning a little red.

Stoick joined Val on her seat, and Astrid sank back down beside Hiccup, and this time her hands finding his was no accident.

He felt his skin pricking again as their fingers met.

"So, what do you do, Astrid?" Val asked.

"I work in a bar," Astrid said, her customer service smile back on her face. "It's not what I want to do forever, but it's enough to get by on for now."

Hiccup frowned, as his thoughts turning to Astrid’s cold, draughty apartment, the heating never on, the endless amount of bills stuffed into every corner. "Astrid wants to be a journalist, eventually," he said. "She's going to take another course or an internship as soon as the money picks up."

"Is that right?" Val said, with a smile.

Astrid blinked. She'd been saving money for ages, putting every spare coin into a separate bank account - but she hadn't told many people, for fear that it might never happen. She'd only mentioned that to Hiccup once, in passing. "Yeah," Astrid said, still staring wide-eyed at Hiccup. "I dread to think of the loan I'd have to take out, though."

"I'm sure you’ll find some way of getting there," Stoick said. "There’s always some way of getting in to the business. I’ve seen plenty of people rise the ranks and do really well – I own a newspaper company, you see."

"You do?" Astrid said, her voice a pitch higher. "Hiccup never said."

She shot him a sideways glance, and he shrugged apologetically.

Val nudged Stoick with her elbow. "Perhaps you could look into getting Astrid an internship, maybe?"

"Well," Stoick said, his eyes widening in panic just as Astrid stammered "there’s no need—"

"I was just offering up a suggestion," Val said, letting out a laugh, raising her hands in surrender. "Didn’t mean to cause a panic. I’m sure Astrid will find her own way into the industry, anyway."

"She will," Hiccup said with conviction, giving Astrid a soft elbow in the sides. "Astrid can do anything she sets her mind too."
Astrid turned to stare at Hiccup again, only to find him looking straight at her with such a fondness in his eyes. Something about what he’d said warmed her stomach, and she knew it was for show, but he was smiling at her and she couldn't help but smile back.

The conversation lulled then, and Val clapped her hands onto her knees. "Right, well I'd love to stay and chat some more, but we've only got a few hours before everyone starts to arrive, and we've got to get everything ready," she said. "I hope you two don't mind helping."

"We're happy to," Astrid said, smiling as she rose out of her seat.

"Right," Val said, leading them into the kitchen, to where three crates of tea lights were sitting on the counter top. "I need you two to decorate the trees with these tea-lights. You'll need to come back for the crates though, you won't be able to carry them all at once."

Astrid grinned, stepped forward and swept all three crates up into her arms with ease, tilting her head at Hiccup. "Lead the way."

Val gaped at her. "My word, you're strong."

"I have to carry a lot of boxes at the bar," Astrid said, by way of an explanation, while Hiccup stood to the side and grinned.

"Maybe you could teach Hiccup a thing or too," Val said, her eyes twinkling.

Astrid raised her eyebrows pointedly at him, in particular, at his very skinny arms. "I'm afraid he's a lost cause."

Val tipped back her head and laughed, the sides of her eyes crinkling. Hiccup scowled and put a hand on Astrid's back, guiding her towards the door. He was not going to have Astrid and his mother ganging up on him the last thing he needed was for the two of them to join forces, together they would be unstoppable they'd be a force to be reckoned with, and Hiccup wasn’t sure he could survive under the weight of both of their teasing.

The house opened out onto a patio via two sets of French windows, and the garden stretched far out, a huge lawn of lush bright green grass that ended with a cluster of apple trees with low hanging branches. Astrid took the three crates down to the bottom, resting them underneath one of the trees, there for them to take from whenever they needed.

They threaded string through wire and reached up to hang the little candles on the lower branches of the trees. From the corner of her eye, Astrid could see Val and Stoick, back up at the house, talking to each other and looking over at them. They were much too far away to hear what they were saying, but she could guess.

"They're totally giving us alone time," she said, a smile on her lips.

Hiccup grinned, and for a moment the two of them were just content with the silence.

"Hey," Astrid muttered, softly elbowing Hiccup in the side. "Do you think we're selling it?"

It took Hiccup a second for him to work out what she meant, and then realised with a jolt that for the past few minutes, he'd forgotten that they were faking at all - he'd forgotten that he wasn't just bringing Astrid home to meet his parents. After that uncomfortable revelation, Hiccup took a breath and raised his head to look over her shoulder at where his parents stood.
"I don't see any reason why they'd think we were faking," he said, hoping that she didn't hear the hitch in his voice.

“What about Snotlout?” Astrid said, her arms straining as she reached for a high branch.

Hiccup swallowed, absentmindedly fiddling with a candle, pulling it out and then pushing it back into its case. "Okay, then. How do we look more couple-like?"

"Like this," she said, and reached out to clutch onto his fingers, pulling him close and standing up on her tip-toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

Hiccup swore that he could feel her lips burning on his cheek, and even when she dropped back down onto her feet, he could feel his skin tingling. For a moment, he could feel a smile tugging at his lips, but he pushed it down and turned his head away so Astrid wouldn't see.

Her fingers were still curled around his.

"Just little touches," Astrid said. "It doesn't have to be much. Just enough to let people know that we're more than just friends."

"Okay," Hiccup said, and found that his mouth was dry. "Little touches. I can do that."

Astrid finally let go of his hand and moved around the tree, hanging up another tea light, and for a moment, Hiccup was still, watching her as she worked. The sun was peeking through the clouds, and it seemed to shine down on her.

Had her hair always been that golden?

"Oi, Hiccup," she said, and threw one of the tea-lights at him. It hit him in the chest, the little candle falling out of its case as it toppled to the floor. "You're slacking off."

Hiccup snapped out of his reverie and bent down to pick up the candle, fixing it back into place before wandering over to Astrid to help hang more of them up.

Stoick and Val stood inside the house by the French windows, their arms straining with the weight of a crate of drinks. Val laid hers on the patio, just outside the window, ready to be taken down into the garden.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" she said, looking outside to where her son was staring across at the girl, the two of them lost in conversation down by the shaded trees.

"Hiccup seems quite taken with her. I wonder how long they've been together," Stoick mused, setting own his crate and then stroking a strand of his beard thoughtfully.

"Oh, much longer than they're letting on," Val said with a knowing smile. "They're so familiar with each other. I think Hiccup's been keeping things from us; I doubt he'd have brought her if Scott hadn't persuaded him to."

The two headed back indoors towards the kitchen, where they both heaved another crate of drinks into their arms.

"Snotlout persuaded him to?" Stoick said, his voice strained a little with the weight of the crate, his eyes wide with surprise.
Val dropped her box down at the patio door with a clatter and flicked him. "Not you too with that silly nickname! Honestly, Stoick, it isn't kind."

"I didn't know Hiccup and Scott got on."

"I asked them to run some errands for me, so they must have found some common ground," Val said.

"Hmm." Stoick stroked his beard again, his eyes fixed outside on Hiccup and Astrid, watching the way his son was never more than a few feet away from her.

Val smiled again and followed his gaze, looking out into the garden where the two of them were playfully arguing. "Remember when we were that age?"

"We were worse than that."

"We could've brought cities down with our arguments."

"We almost did."

"I always won."

"Of course you did, my dear."

Stoick pulled her closer and the two of them closed their eyes as they leaned into each other, smiling into the kiss.

There was more to do, still. Hiccup and Astrid helped put up at least three tables that groaned under the weight of all the food that had been set out; fresh fruit, rolls of bread and little bowls of olives. They set out plates with plastic knives and forks, and found things that could hold down napkins.

"Your parents really don't do things by halves, do they?" Astrid commented after watching Stoick and Val erect a large gazebo in one corner of the garden, setting up a sound system underneath.

"Nope, never have," Hiccup said. "It's why they like the reunion so much. It's a chance to show off."

She prodded him in the stomach. "Don't be rude," she said, but she was smiling. "They're nice."

"They're on their best behaviour," Hiccup said. From the corner of his eye, he could see Stoick and Val standing in the French windows, looking out at them. "They're trying not to step on my toes or get in my way."

Astrid grinned, a twinkle in her eye and a grin on her face as she turned to look at Hiccup. "Do they have embarrassing stories?"

Hiccup's expression twisted from one of content to one of pure horror. "Astrid. Astrid no."

"I'm going to ask them."

Hiccup took a hold of her arms. "Astrid. Listen to me. Listen to me carefully. On no account are you to ask them for stories."

"No way," she said, giggling with wicked glee. "I want to know what stupid stuff fifteen year old
Hiccup was doing."

"I don't need them to give you blackmail fodder."

"Who says I would use them for blackmail?" she said, her eyes glittering.

"Because I know you."

She flicked him on the nose. "Fine, Mr. Boring, I won't ask for embarrassing stories," she said, moving out of his grip and turning back towards the food table. "I'll ask for baby pictures, instead."

Hiccup spluttered, and covered his face with his hands. "Noooo."

Astrid giggled.

"They'd do it, too," Hiccup said, his hands covering his horrified expression. "They like you."

He’d been distracted by the little fight he’d had with her, that he hadn’t noticed Val leave the house and wander into the garden. Now, from the corner of his eye, he could see his mother watching him, so, while Astrid’s back was turned at the food table, he put his hands around Astrid's waist from behind her and kissed her on the cheek. "But I don't know anyone who wouldn't."

For a moment he was frozen, feeling like he’d crossed a line. Talking about casual touches and little kisses were one thing, but in practice it was different, and he braced himself for the punch to come, or for Astrid to go silent, or for the awkwardness to set in.

But it didn’t. Astrid just laughed, and kept working on the food table, making no indication that she was bothered by his hands on her waist, and the more he thought about it, the more Hiccup realised how natural the words had felt coming out of his mouth, like it was something he would have said anyway. His fingers lingered on her sides, even when Val had darted back into the house, and there was no one to see the two of them anymore.

When he realised what he was doing, he took his hands away and turned around, scratching the back of his head, swallowing, his chest suddenly tight.

He took the end of his shirt and flapped it with his fingers, trying to give himself some air, idly wondering if Astrid has noticed the sudden change in temperature. It must be something about this spring weather, cold one moment, then hot the next.

While Astrid was distracted laying out the food table, Val sidled up to Hiccup and took him to one side, sitting him down on the patio steps.

"She’s a wonderful girl," she said, her eyes crinkling as she smiled. “You’re very lucky.”

“I know,” Hiccup said, quickly. His fingers threaded together and he stretched his arms into the air and circled them around, resting his elbows on the top step, and looking up towards the sky. “She’s… well, she sure is something.”

Val smiled down at her son, before looking back down across the garden. “I know I’ve only known her for an hour or two, but sometimes when you meet someone you know they’re a good person,” she said, and then shook her head. “Sorry, that didn’t make much sense.”

“No, I get it,” Hiccup said, a small smile on his face as he stared down at where Astrid was talking to Stoick, tossing her braid over a shoulder as she tipped back her head and let out a laugh.
“What I’m trying to say is—” Val nudged him on the shoulder – “I approve.”

She wasn’t the only one – Stoick was very taken with Astrid too, Hiccup could tell by the sideways smiles he kept shooting her and by the way he would glance at her, then at Val, and grin. Something twisted in his stomach as he thought about telling his parents that the two of them hadn’t worked out together – he could almost feel the disappointment.

“Stop slacking off.” Astrid had appeared in front of him, her eyes glittering in the sun as she folded her arms.

“Yes, Hiccup, how could you make Astrid do all of the hard work?” Val said, mock-scandalised, joining in with Astrid’s game.

Hiccup pulled himself up and off the patio steps, brushing down the dust on his trousers. “Wow,” he said, dryly. “I can’t believe it’s only been an hour and the two of you are already ganging up on me.”

Still, he couldn’t stop himself from smiling when Astrid laughed, and he followed her when she turned on her heel back down the garden.

In the end, it didn’t really matter what his parents thought. He could prolong the inevitable and avoid the disappointment for a few days, but he knew he couldn’t keep this going forever. He never wanted to lose what he and Astrid had – the kind of friendship that others could only envy.

But when she wasn’t looking, his fingers ghosted over the patch of skin on his cheek where her lips had been, still tingling a little, even after all this time. His eyes stayed on her the whole time while she helped Val set up bunting, watching the way wisps of her hair floated in the gentle wind, and thought to himself that pretending to be a couple with Astrid Hofferson really wouldn’t be that bad at all.
By the time people had started to show up, the clouds had cleared and the sun blared bright in the sky. A gentle breeze blew through the garden, the trees swaying ever so slightly.

"Of course," Hiccup had said, when Astrid pointed out how quickly the weather had changed. "I'm pretty sure my parents could control the sun if they wanted to."

He and Astrid were holding hands. It still felt unfamiliar to him, odd that they should be having so much constant contact. His hand felt like it was tingling, and every time Astrid's fingers brushed across his, he felt something like sparks shooting up his arm.

*It's just because you've never done this before*, Hiccup thought to himself. *That's why it doesn't feel quite right.*

But there was a nagging sensation in the back of his brain, one that said that it didn't feel wrong, the opposite in fact, that it felt very, very right.

The Haddocks were a boisterous lot. It seemed that the garden went from quiet tranquillity to a buzz of noise - loud laughter and chatter. They were all so talkative, too. Each and every one of them had something to say about something – even the people that Hiccup was sure he'd only ever said one word to in his life.

"You two are so sweet," said one person whom Hiccup didn't recognise at all but was pretty sure he was related to.

Astrid and Hiccup had been leaning against the food table for most of the afternoon – “Party survival 101 – stick by the food,” Astrid had said – but people were still gravitating around them.

The woman in front of them was still talking, but Hiccup wasn’t listening. He was just trying to rack his brains to remember her name.

“I’m so glad you’ve found someone,” she said, tilting her head to the side with a smile. “We never thought you’d bring anyone home.”

*Was it Emily? Amelia?*

Astrid held onto Hiccup’s arm and rested her head on his shoulder. “I thought he’d never bring me home.”

...*Elizabeth? No, it was something that began with a B…*

“Well, I’m glad he did. It’s been lovely to meet you Astrid,” the woman said, reaching forward to shake Astrid’s hand.

...*Bethany? Belinda?* Astrid smiled and shook the woman’s hand politely. “Lovely to meet you too.”

It hit Hiccup all at once – a flash of recognition. “Beatrice!” he said, a little too loudly, clicking his fingers and slapping his hand into his palm.

Beatrice blinked, taking a step back. “Sorry, did I say something wrong?”
“Oh, no!” Hiccup stammered, his face flushing bright red. “You didn’t- I just- Oh, Astrid, I think
that’s my mother calling, we better go…”

He took Astrid’s hand in his and led her across the garden, leaving Beatrice hovering by the snack
table, quite bewildered.

“Wow,” Astrid said, her voice dry as she let herself be dragged away by Hiccup. “That was
spectacular.”

“I couldn’t remember her name, okay?” Hiccup muttered, still bright red. He carded a hand
through his hair and refused to look at her.

Astrid raised her eyebrows. “And I think she realised that by the way you yelled it in her face.”

Hiccup groaned. “Alright, we’ll file this away as one of my particularly dumb moments and then
we can just go ahead and never mention it again…”

He turned around and joined the party again, weaving his way through the crowd of people.
Astrid watched him go, a grin on her face.

“If you think I’m not going to bring this up all the time, you’re wrong!” she called, her voice full
of glee.

That wasn’t their only encounter. As the afternoon dragged on, they were bombarded by person
after person, all of them far too interested in Hiccup’s love life for people he only saw once or
twice a year.

"So, how did you two meet?"

It was the question that they had been getting all fronts, from every friend and family member. It
felt like there was a spotlight over the two of them - and it didn't surprise Hiccup in the least. He
had never admitted to his crushes to any of his family members. They were all go hard or go home
kind of people, and he really didn't need anyone meddling with his business in the name of helping. So it must have been exciting for them, something new. Or just something new to tease
him about.

Astrid was perfect at this - she could smile and answer questions like nothing else.

"We were on the same course in university," she would say, smiling up at Hiccup. "We took a lot
of the same classes, but we didn't quite manage to keep in touch. We ran into each other a few
months ago, and well, we just took it from there."

That was his cue to tack something on at the end, something cutesy like, "And I'm so glad we
did," while staring into her eyes.

He wasn't able to do that for very long. There was something thoroughly disarming about Astrid's
big blue eyes, something he had never noticed before. He would always find himself swallowing
and breaking their gaze, staring down at his feet, mouth suddenly dry.

This whole thing with Astrid was really getting into his head. He could feel himself getting far too
captured up in the act – he kept having uncomfortable moments, realising that for the past few
minutes, he hadn’t been faking at all. It was getting a little silly. Astrid was his friend, nothing
more, and this facade was messing things up, making him act in certain ways. Like how every
touch from her was making him nervous in a way it never had before. Touch between them had
an implication now, and it had a way of making Hiccup’s brain fuzzy.
And it wasn't helping that everyone was lapping it all up.

One particularly nosy relation began grilling them for all the personal details.

"So, when was the first kiss?" she said, leering at the couple, a little too close for Hiccup or Astrid's liking.

The two of them stopped still at the question, glancing at each other in panic for a moment. It hadn't been something that had come up between the pair of them in their preparation, and now they just stammered, a little lost for words.

"Now, now, Gretchen, don't make them uncomfortable," someone said from behind them, in loud, braying Scottish accent.

For the first time in this whole debacle, Hiccup broke out into a grin and whipped around, letting go of Astrid's hand to hug the man. "Gobber!" he said, for once his voice full of genuine mirth.

"Good to see you, boy," Gobber said, scuffling Hiccup's hair. "Now what's this I hear about you bringing a date?"

Hiccup grinned, and turned around to hold Astrid's hand again and bring her over. "Gobber, this is Astrid. My girlfriend."

The word burned on his tongue, and he realised all at once that he hadn't referred to her as that to anyone. It felt odd in his mouth. Strange, like it wasn’t quite right.

"Lovely to meet you, lass," Gobber said, shaking her hand. "I hope you've been taking good care of my nephew."

"I've been trying," Astrid said, looking up at Hiccup and softly elbowing him in the side. "He doesn't make it easy."

Gobber laughed. "I would expect nothing less. I remember having to babysit him. You wouldn't believe some of the stories I could tell you."

Astrid's eyes twinkled. "I'd love to hear some of them."

"Okay!" Hiccup said loudly, putting his hands on Astrid's shoulders and steering her away from the man. "It's time to go, now."

"Just you wait, Hiccup!" Gobber called after him, cheerfully. "You can't keep her away forever."

They wandered down to the edge of the garden, out of earshot of the gathering, and Astrid looked up at Hiccup, a grin tugging at her lips.

"Gobber?" she asked.

Hiccup smiled. "One of my uncles. It's a nickname."

"I'm starting to think that your family has a very cruel sense of humour regarding names."

"Something like that."

Astrid opened her mouth to say something more, but was interrupted when music began to fill the air, Val having fiddled with the sound system. Everyone cheered, and slowly but surely, people headed towards the middle of the lawn, breaking off into couples and starting to dance.
Hiccup smiled and was about to offer his hand out towards her, when a voice from behind him sneered, "Well, well, well, if it isn't Mr. Haddock the younger."

Hiccup froze, muttering the words "Oh, no," before plastering the fakest smile Astrid had ever seen him make across his face, and turning around.

It was a tall, lean man, with a face that made Astrid want to take a step away. His eyes were sunken, dark circles surrounding them, his nose crooked and his mouth twisted into an unkind smirk. He had a hat jammed onto his hairless head, and as he held up his hand to shake, his sleeve slipped back to reveal a shiny metal hook.

Hiccup kept his hands firmly at his sides. "Alvin," he said, his voice much higher in pitch than before. "It's so good that you could come."

"Isn't it?" Alvin said, still smiling like he belonged in Stepford. He turned his leer on Astrid, and she felt her skin crawl a little. "This must be the lady friend I've heard so much about."

Hiccup instinctively put an arm around Astrid's waist. "Yes. This is Astrid Hofferson."

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, but made no attempt to offer her hand. Her eyes kept flickering down at the hook, gleaming in the sun.

"Pleasure's all mine," Alvin said. "It's quite a convincing little facade the two of you have going on here. I do hope it works out for you."

The pair of them tensed. Hiccup's fingers froze on Astrid's waist.

"I don't know what you mean," Hiccup said, his voice sharp.

Alvin laughed. "Of course you don't. Enjoy the reunion, you two."

He turned on his heel, ready to disappear into the crowd of people dancing but then he stopped, and looked over his shoulder at them. "You haven't seen Snotlout, have you?"

Hiccup shook his head.

"Pity," Alvin said. He hadn't stopped smiling the whole time, and there was an unkind glint in his eye. "Well, I'm sure he'll be along soon."

Then he was gone, lost in the swathes of people.

Hiccup took a breath out, and it took him a few moments to realise that his arm was still around Astrid's waist. He stepped away from her and ran his fingers through his hair.

"What just happened?" Astrid said, looking from Hiccup to the crowd of people, and back to Hiccup again.

Hiccup sighed. "Alvin just happened. Alvin the Treacherous."

"Another one of your family nicknames?"

"Yes, and this one fits perfectly," Hiccup muttered, his features twisting into a scowl, his arms folding. "That man's nothing but trouble."

Astrid frowned. "What happened to his hand?"

"No one knows," Hiccup said, his voice low. "He changes his story every time someone asks."
Why he has a hook instead of a prosthetic is beyond me. Dramatic flair, probably.”

His fingers curled around his arms, a dark look on his face. Astrid chewed on her lower lip.

“You don’t think he’s going to be a problem do you?” she said, kicking her foot back and forth in a nervous twitch. “I mean, if he knows about us—"

“No,” Hiccup said quickly. His expression changed, his dark look gone as he looked down at Astrid and smiled. “He’s just trying to stir the pot. No one will believe him. We have more to worry about from Snotlout, honestly.”

She glanced back up towards the middle of the garden, but Alvin was nowhere to be found. He’d completely disappeared. “You sure?” she asked.

Hiccup matched her gaze across the garden. “We’ll keep an eye on him.”

"Oi, Hiccup!” someone yelled, gesturing over to where the pair of them stood. "Bring your girl over for a dance!"

After that, everyone started cheering again, only this time they were cheering Hiccup's name and waving him and Astrid over.

Hiccup rolled his eyes, and offered his hand out to Astrid. She took it with a smile, and let herself be led into the middle of the garden, their makeshift ‘dance floor’. He twirled her around in what he hoped was a graceful movement, but in reality probably looked very awkward, and rested his hands on her waist, while she looped her arms around his neck. Someone wolf-whistled. At first, the pair couldn’t help but feel self-conscious, with the weight of Alvin’s words on their shoulders and the realization that someone knew they were faking, the two suddenly felt that their every move was being scrutinised.

At first, they swayed in concentric circles, their hands frozen in space, too worried about the people watching them to let go but also too worried about crossing a line to get closer, but after a while, Hiccup took Astrid’s hands in his. Their fingers linked together, Astrid grinned up at him, and somehow the audience melted into the background, and in that moment it was just him and his best friend, dancing to music.

"Hiccup, I hate to break this to you," Astrid said, after he'd stepped on her toe for the third time. "But you are a terrible dancer."

Hiccup grinned. She was smiling up at him, eyes shining under the sunlight, hair in her face. "Did you expect anything else?"

"You know, surprisingly enough, I didn't."

"You think you're any better?"

Astrid gasped, mock offended. "I'll have you know, Haddock, that I took dance classes in school."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. He hadn't known that. "Were you any good?"

"Top of the class."

The song ended, and Astrid let go of Hiccup's hands, a smile still tugging at her lips. "I'm gonna go get a drink," she said. "Be right back."
Hiccup watched her go, somehow unable to stop from smiling at her retreating figure.

"That was very cute."

Hiccup blinked, surprised by the sudden noise, and turned to see one of the younger family members standing behind him. She'd been part of the group of people a little too eager for details, hanging on to the couple’s every word and keeping one eye on them at all times.

"Your flirting is very sweet," she said, squeezing Hiccup’s arm. "It's nice to see that from you."

Then she turned and left.

Flirting?

He hadn't been flirting. Nothing he'd said to Astrid while they were dancing had been for show. It had just been typical Astrid-and-Hiccup banter, the normal kind of ribbing and teasing that their relationship had always been. It hadn't been flirting, not at all, not in a million years.

Hadn’t it?

"Earth to Hiccup?"

Astrid was back, and holding a plastic cup out towards him. He took it without saying anything, still kind of dazed by what the other girl had said.

"You okay?" Astrid said.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Just distracted."

She narrowed her eyes at him but said nothing else, turning around and joining the party once more.

Up on the patio, Hiccup’s father was sitting on a lawn chair, looking down at the party. He sprung out of his seat when his brother-in-law approached.

“Stoick! It’s been too long,” Gobber said, grasping Stoick by the shoulders and pulling him into a hug.

They had been friends ever since they were boys. The two of them had been as thick as thieves, as inseparable as the sun from the moon, and they had only got closer when Stoick started to date Gobber’s sister, and he became part of the family. Though Stoick and Val had never officially married, Stoick considered Gobber his brother anyway.

Gobber had been a constant in Hiccup's life growing up. He was the weird uncle Hiccup went to when he was feeling overwhelmed and couldn’t talk to his father, and he’d always given the boy good at vice. He’d also been the one who taught Hiccup the important things, like how trolls would steal your socks. Only the left ones, though.

"You better make sure to pair them all up, Hiccup, and never leave them on your floor, or that troll will get them!” he would say.

Val told him off, afraid that it would scare the little boy, but five year old Hiccup had no such qualms. Instead, the toddler went hunting for trolls, determined to find one and prove his uncle
Then, Hiccup had left for university and Stoick and Val had moved away from their hometown, which meant Gobber was no longer always around, a loss that every member of the Haddock family felt deeply. Gobber was one of them, plain and simple, last name or not.

"Too right," Stoick said gruffly, sitting back down. "You should come and visit more often."

Gobber shrugged, and joined Stoick, sinking down into the chair next to him. "If money wasn't an issue, I'd be here all the time. You should come back and visit Berk more often, your summer home is getting dusty."

Stoick and Val still owned their house on the Isle of Berk, the place where Hiccup had grown up. They called it a summer house, a place for them to go when they needed a holiday, but they'd found it so difficult to find the time off work to go there often. Sometimes they let it out as a holiday home, for the few tourists that knew about the little old island that was Berk. Gobber had the keys and was looking after it for them in the meantime.

"We just might be doing that very soon," a voice from behind them said.

Val appeared by their sides, holding a tray of drinks for the three of them. Gobber grinned at his sister and took a glass off the tray, taking a sip. Val pulled up another chair, settling herself down on the other side of Stoick.

"Ah, so you're making the announcement today," he said.

Val broke out into the smile. "Yes, we are."

"Does Hiccup know about it?"

Stoick and Val smiled at each other and linked their hands together. "We haven't told him yet. It's going to be a surprise."

Gobber grinned, and for a moment there was silence as the three of them sipped their drinks and looked out into the party, in particular, at where Hiccup was dancing with Astrid.

"The boy's grown up, hasn't he?" Gobber said, gesturing over towards him. "Never thought I'd see the day that he'd snatch up a young lady for himself."

"It was a big surprise for us," Val said. "He hadn't made any hints or signs at all, if Scott hadn't told us, we'd never have known."

"Snotlout told you before Hiccup?" Gobber said, blinking in surprise.

Val scowled and threw her arms in the air. "Scott, Gobber, his name is Scott," she said, furrowing her brow. "Honestly, my family is so rude."

Stoick and Gobber shared a look, and he cocked an eyebrow. "You realise you nicknamed me Gobber, right?"

Val smacked him on the arm, which did nothing but prove his point.

A few moments passed, the three of them enjoying each other's company – a peaceful moment in the sun.

Stoick was the one to break the silence, a little twinkle in his eye as he grinned over at Gobber.
“So when are you going to bring a date to one of these things, Gobber?”

“Stoick, if I ever date anyone, I’m going to pull a Hiccup and not tell you,” Gobber said, a grin tugging at his lips. “And I won’t make the mistake of letting a tattle-tale family member in on the secret.”

“Why would you deny us another Mr. Gobber?” Stoick said, laughing.

“Please, Stoick, one is enough,” Val said in a dry voice, taking a sip from her drink.

The three laughed, and the conversation lulled again, the three of them focusing on their drinks.

“I wonder why he didn't tell you about her before,” Gobber said, more to himself than anyone else.

"Oh, he's a very private person. Probably didn't want to subject the poor girl to all this Haddock nonsense," Val said. "Especially as he seems to really love her."

Stoick raised an eyebrow. "You think he loves her? Already?"

Val laughed, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Have you seen the way he looks at her?" she said. "If that's not love, I don't know what is."

She points over to where Hiccup and Astrid are still dancing, in the middle of the garden, the two holding each other's hands and laughing, like they were the only two people on that lawn and no one else was watching.

"See?" she said. "He looks at her like she’s the only reason that the world keeps spinning.”
The party had been going on for hours, the day shifting from morning, to noon, to afternoon, all the while the reunion kept going strong; Haddocks were party people, and they never seemed to tire.

Thankfully for Hiccup’s legs, the dancing had slowed down, more and more people leaving the dance floor in search of refreshments, until there was no one left, most people settling down on picnic blankets or on garden chairs. Val had turned the music down, and now it was a gentle hum in the background, mixing in and out of the sounds of different conversations.

Hiccup and Astrid had been some of the last to the leave the dance floor. Their limbs ached, but there were smiles on their faces, as the two of them headed off to find some shade, still holding onto each other. Hiccup’s clothes were significantly more rumpled now, his collar sticking up in the air and his shirt untucked from his trousers. Astrid had grinned affectionately and put his collar back in place before they found their own little space in the grass to sit.

“I hope you realise how much of an impression you’ve made,” Hiccup said, looking at her fondly while she fiddled with the straps on her sandals. “Everyone loves you.”

"You're gonna have to run everyone’s names through with me,” Astrid said, kicking her sandals off and dropping onto the ground, letting out a sigh as she stretched her legs out, her bare toes wiggling between the blades of grass. "I'm never going to get all of these nicknames straight."

Hiccup grinned, joining her on the floor and lying on his back, his eyes squinting up at the sun.

"So there's my father Stoick," he explained, shifting one arm back to support his head. "Stoic with a K. Because he's stoic."

"Why with the K?" Astrid said.

"No one knows," Hiccup said, a small smile quirking at the edge of his lips. "I think it's because my fifteen year old father thought it sounded cool but didn't know how to spell it."

Astrid gave him a gentle nudge, and chastised him with: “Don’t be rude,” but she was still smiling.

"Then there's my mother - Val. That's an easy one, it's short for Valerie," Hiccup said. "There's Scott Jorgenson, my cousin, or Snotlout. I made that one up, because he's a snot."

Astrid snorted.

Hiccup kept going. "My uncle Gobber - not sure where that one came from, but he's been Gobber for as long as I can remember. Alvin's name is just Alvin, but we added the treacherous because that's what he is."

Hiccup shuddered inwardly as he said the name. Alvin had long since disappeared from the party, but he could still see his face in his mind's eye - the dark glint in the man's eye and the twisted smirk. It still worried him a little bit that Alvin knew their secret; that man was trouble, and Hiccup didn't trust him as far as he could spit.
He moved on. "You met the twins, right?"

"Oh yeah," Astrid said, raising her eyebrows and staring up at the sky. "I met them."

Earlier, while she'd been getting a drink, a girl had sidled up to her. She was tall, with dirty blonde hair that had been twisted into two long spindly plaits, and she’d come up a little too close and narrowed her eyes at Astrid, looking her over closely.

"So, you're Astrid?" she'd said, her voice a long drawl.

"...Yeah?" Astrid had said, backing away a few steps.

"No, she doesn't look big enough," a voice came from behind her, and Astrid jumped, turning to see a boy who looked uncannily like the girl: he had the same long, spindly hair, but without the plaits. "Wouldn't make a big enough splash."

"I'm sorry?" Astrid said, blinking.

The boy ran a hand through his hair, before reaching out for her to shake. "Tuffnut Thorstan. Future entrepreneur, man, myth and legend." Astrid shook his hand tentatively. "We're looking for a test subject to test our new, genius idea."

"Ruffnut Thorstan," his twin said, also shaking her hand. "It's my idea too."

"So get this," Tuffnut said, "A new range of swimming pool accessories. Catapults!"

"Yeah, you get in, you have someone to wind you up -" Ruffnut started.

"And then they let you go, and-"

"And you get launched into the pool!"

"Sploooosh!" Tuffnut puffed his cheeks out and made an elaborate gesture with his hands, stretching his arms out and wiggling his fingers.

"We were going to test it in the Haddock pool," Ruffnut said.

"But you're too small," Tuffnut said.

"You wouldn't make a big enough splash."

"We wouldn't have conclusive evidence."

The two of them nod at each other matter-of-factly, like they'd just said something that made complete and total sense to the outside world. Astrid blinked, taking a moment to take in everything that this peculiar pair had just said.

"...The Haddocks don't have a pool, do they?" was all she managed to say, her eyebrows raised.

"Ah, the lady speaks the truth!" Tuffnut said, his finger in the air as he spoke, before making a fist and slapping it into his other palm. "Back to the drawing board, sister."

"Aye, aye, captain!" Ruffnut cried, raising her hand in a salute.

Tuffnut hurried off into the crowd of people, while Ruffnut stayed behind a moment, her eyes still narrowed as she looked Astrid up and down, and Astrid felt uncomfortably like she was being sized up.
"It's a pity about Hiccup," she said, glancing over to where he stood in the crowd. "That boy is fiiiiine. See you around, Astrid."

Then she disappeared off after her brother, gone as quickly as she had been there, leaving Astrid to wonder what on Earth had just happened.

Hiccup snorted after she'd relayed the story.

"Rachel and T.J. Thorstan, the children of some family friends," he explained. "They usually go by Ruffnut and Tuffnut. Because they're, uh, rough and tough."

Astrid laughed. "Have they always been like that?"

"Oh yeah," Hiccup mumbled, his eyes widening like he was remembering some terrible things. "Always."

"Any other weird nicknames I should know about?"

"That's all from here," Hiccup said, leaning on his elbows as he scanned the crowd of people. "But trust me, there are more back in my hometown. The place is mad on nicknames, you wouldn't believe."

Astrid smiled. "And yet, somehow, amongst all of those, Hiccup is actually the name on your birth certificate."

Hiccup groaned and buried his head back in the grass, his hands covering his face. "I will literally pay you all the money in the world to stop making fun of my name."

She just laughed. "Never, Hiccup. Never."

"You're the absolute worst person on this Earth and I don't know why we're friends," Hiccup grumbled, turning his back to her, and pouting into the grass, all while Astrid giggled.

That wasn't true. The whole day he'd actually been thinking about how much he enjoyed having Astrid as a friend and throughout the party he’d been musing on how lucky he was to have a friend like her - someone he could joke around and have fun with. Someone who could make him smile. Yes, Astrid was the best friend he had ever had, and today was only reinforcing that.

The day drew on steadily, and Hiccup and Astrid were taking the moment to let themselves relax, just lying in the grass next to each other, passing the occasional word while they enjoyed the sun. As much fun as they had been having, it had been tiring to jump between family member and family member and repeat conversations over and over, and it was nice to have a quiet moment.

Their peace was interrupted, though, when shadow passed across them. Hiccup blinked, put a hand over his forehead, and found himself looking up at a young woman, dark hair arranged over her shoulder.

"Heather!" Hiccup said, his voice full of delight, and he allowed himself to be pulled up off the floor.

"It's been too long," Heather said, dark rimmed eyes sparkling as she pulled the boy into a hug. "Where's this girlfriend I've been hearing all about?"

He offered a hand to Astrid and helped her up off the floor. "This is Astrid Hofferson," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist.
Hiccup was starting to feel a little like he should record the introduction on his phone, and have it ready to play whenever a different family member or friend came over to talk to them. He was beginning to tire a little of the routine; it was the same every time: say her name, keep his arm around her waist and force a smile while they were interrogated on every aspect of their relationship.

But he owed Heather this - they were old friends, but even old friends found it difficult to keep up contact with life in the way and time passing as it did.

Heather's eyebrows shot into the air when she looked at Astrid properly. "My God, you're pretty," she said, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips, her eyes twinkling. "Did Hiccup pay you to come here?"

Hiccup and Astrid shot each other look, their mouths parted slightly, frozen for a moment, before Hiccup faked a coughing fit and Astrid banged a hand on his back.

"I can assure you I'm here of my own accord," Astrid said, after a few moments of dithering.

...Well, it wasn't quite a lie.

"Pity," Heather said, still smiling. She took Astrid's hand in hers. "It was wonderful to meet you, Astrid."

Hiccup's voice took on a firmer tone as he said: "Heather, no."

Astrid's eyes flickered up at him. "No, what?"

"He's being possessive," Heather said, a grin on her face.

He rolled his eyes. "She's a terrible flirt," he grumbled.

Heather still had Astrid's hand in hers. "If you ever get bored of this one," she said, her eyes glittering in the sunshine, "come and find me."

Astrid's mouth opened, a delighted smile spreading across her face. "Oh, I'm sure I will," she said.

Heather winked, and then with a wave of her hand, sped off towards the house. Astrid watched her go, her smile still stretched from ear to ear.

"I like her," she said.

"Don't you start."

Astrid shot Hiccup an amused smile, as she prodded him in the side. "Are you jealous?"

"Not even in the slightest," Hiccup grumbled, wrapping his arm around Astrid's waist. "Come on, there are more people we have to talk to."

"Ha, you're so jealous!"

Hiccup ignored Astrid's cackles as he dragged her across the garden and back into the fray. He wasn’t really mad. Heather had always been one for teasing, and he’d known the moment he’d seen her standing over him that he’d be in for it when she and Astrid inevitably teamed up. Actually, for the most part he was enjoying himself – he’d almost forgotten that he and Astrid were faking it; it hadn’t taken long for the casual touching to start to seem normal to him. Introducing Astrid as is girlfriend was getting easier too – the word had stopped catching in his
throat; the more that he said it, the more natural it felt.

But as much fun as he was having, he couldn’t help but feel a little sense of doom creeping up the back of his spine. There was a reason this whole silly situation had gone ahead - a person who’d set this facade in motion, and he hadn’t shown up yet. It was all a matter of time.

Sure enough, as the clock struck four and Val was doing her third round of handing out snacks and offering drinks, the clouds seemed to draw in, hiding the sun and covering the whole garden in shade, and someone appeared from around the back gate, talking loudly and scoffing down food.

Snotlout had arrived.

Hiccup shifted around the side of the garden, keeping his head down low in an attempt to keep a low profile, hoping that with some luck, he might go unnoticed. Unfortunately, Hiccup had never been particularly lucky, and Snotlout zeroed in on Hiccup, pointing at him within the crowd and yelling his name.

"Hiccup!" he said, a jeer on his face. "Just the man I was looking for."

He took a few steps closer, thundering across the garden while his mouth twisting into a grin as he looked this way and that. "Where's your girlfriend? Still imaginary, I see."

A few minutes before, Astrid had slipped off into the house to use the toilet, leaving Hiccup alone. Hiccup cursed her perfect timing.

"She's here," Hiccup said, folding his arms and leaning against the patio wall, hoping he looked nonchalant. "Where's your lady friend, then?"

Snotlout ignored the question. He made a show of looking this way and that, opening his arms out wide with huge grin when he didn’t spot anybody. "Where, Hiccup? I don't see her."

Then he tipped his head back and guffawed. "I knew you were making it up," he said, wiping tears out of his eyes. "I thought maybe you might weasel your way out of it or come up with an excuse, but I didn’t think you’d try and keep pretending."

“She’s here,” Hiccup said again, a little more forcefully this time, but his face was burning, and he couldn’t keep himself from ducking his head and staring at his feet. People were starting to look. What if they put two and two together?

"Where is she then, Hiccup?" Snotlout said, his voice getting louder still. He was standing back, his arms stretched out again. “Where is this girlfriend of yours?”

Hiccup’s eyes flickered this way and that, searching for her, she must have come out by now, she must be somewhere… and then he spotted her – hovering just inside one of the French windows, half in and half out of the house. She was chatting to one of his family members, waylaid as she’d been coming back to join him.

Hiccup breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s her,” he said, pointing her out to Snotlout, and the two of them watch as Astrid tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

“Her?” Snotlout said, his voice incredulous. “There’s no way on this Earth, not in a million years that that girl is your-”

Snotlout’s voice faded into the background as Astrid turned her head and began marching towards them, and a set of fingers curled around his and pulled him towards her, another hand reaching out
and pulling his face towards hers. Leaving him no time to think about what was about to happen, Astrid's lips were on his.

Time froze.

Hiccup stilled.

Everyone around them seemed to melt away into nothing. In that moment, it was just him and her, her lips on his, their fingers intertwining, her hand in his hair, keeping him close to her.

He was kissing Astrid Hofferson.

Astrid Hofferson was kissing him.

Something in his chest roared. His heart was thumping and his lips were buzzing.

After a few seconds of being frozen in space, Hiccup came to his senses and kissed her back, his hand going to her cheek and tilting her face towards him. For those few seconds all his senses registered was her - the way her lips were soft, and that her hair smelled like flowers. Her mouth was stained with whatever she had been drinking before, something red and sweet and sugary. Her fingers curled tighter around his, pulling him closer still, until he seemed to melt into her, no longer two different people but one being, one complete entity. He could hear her heartbeat, thumping in time with his, a loud drum beat in the background.

When she pulled away, he was left dizzy, frozen in place once more. His body whined at the separation, and he had to force himself not to remove the distance between them and pull her straight back into the kiss.

Astrid turned to look at Snotlout. "Sorry," she said brightly, and held out her hand for Snotlout to shake. "Astrid Hofferson, Hiccup's girlfriend. Nice to meet you."

Snotlout looked like he'd just seen a pig dress up in a tuxedo, sprout wings and fly across the ocean. His mouth was wide open as he gaped, and he shook Astrid's hand without saying anything, too shocked to form sentences.

After the exchange was over, Snotlout scuttled off, still unable to talk properly after what he'd just witnessed.

Astrid giggled. "His face," she said, her grin stretching from ear to ear. "That was priceless."

"Yeah..." Hiccup said, and swallowed, his mouth dry. "Priceless."

Snotlout wasn't the only one unable to make a coherent thought in that moment. Hiccup’s heart was still thumping out of control and his hands were shaking, his hands covered in a sheen of sweat, his head spinning. Something in his brain had gone completely fuzzy, and he couldn’t remember how words worked.

He had just made out with his best friend, and every fibre of his being was itching for it to happen again.

They had never discussed kissing.

In all their preparations, in all their discussions, in all the military-style planning, they had never
talked about kissing. They'd discussed their history, the backstory to their fake relationships, casual touching, the brush of each other's skin on one another, but they had never, not once, thought about kissing. Not proper kissing, anyway. Not your body on mine, pressed together, spit-swapping, holding on for dear life, never leave me, kissing.

God, *why* had they never thought about it? *How* that they managed to completely swerve past it in all of their plans?

Hiccup could still feel her lips buzzing against his, like a constant imprint across his mouth, a tattoo inked into his lips in big blank ink: 'Astrid was here.'

"Hiccup, Astrid!" His mother called from up on the patio. The three of them turned to see her waving them over. "Bring Scott over here!"

Hiccup was still in a little bit of a daze. His limbs felt a little like they were working on autopilot as they wandered up towards Val, working for him while his mind went astray. His arm was around Astrid's waist again, and all he could think about was the way his knuckles were brushing against the bare skin of her arm. He barely noticed Snotlout grumbling and slinking out from where he'd scuttled off, trailing behind them with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Scott!" Val looked down at Snotlout with a wide smile. "It's so lovely to see you."

Snotlout's voice was gruff as he said hello, and his limbs were stiff while Hiccup's mother pulled him into a hug. It was the first word he'd spoken since witnessing Hiccup and Astrid kiss, and it didn't look like he was up to saying much else. His expression had gone from dumbstruck to sullen in the space of a few seconds, and he was scuffing his toes against the patio, the tips of his shoes covered in dirt. Val pretended not to notice any of this, and turned her smile back to Hiccup and Astrid.

"Hey, you two!" she said. "How are you doing?"

"We're doing great, Mrs. Haddock!" Astrid said, smiling pleasantly. "It's a wonderful party."

Val smiled. "Please, call me Val, dear! And I'm so glad you're having a good time. What about you, Hiccup?"

Did she know? Could she tell that the earth was shattering around him right now? It felt like it was written all over his face.

"Yeah," he said. "Great. Good party."

He had no idea how he was supposed to form a coherent sentence right now. He could barely choke out a couple of words.

Val led them to a set of empty lawn chairs, and they sat in semi-circle: Val, then Astrid, then Hiccup, and finally Snotlout, who looked like he would rather be anywhere but here.

"So, how's university going for you, Scott?" Val asked, after she'd offered everyone drinks.

"S'fine."

"Do you like your course?"

"Yeah."
"Find a job yet?"

"No."

It took a few more rounds of questioning and even more monosyllabic answers for Val to realise that she wasn't going to get anything that could be construed as polite conversation out of Snotlout, so she turned her attention to Hiccup and Astrid.

"You never told me how the two of you met," Val said, taking a sip from her drink and offering the two of them a genuine smile.

"At university?" Hiccup mumbled, swallowing.

It had been a couple of minutes, and Hiccup still couldn’t string more than two words together. His lips were still buzzing, set alight with the feel of Astrid's on his, and he couldn't really look at her properly. The less time he spent talking, the better.

Val made a noise that sounded like 'pshaw' whilst waving a hand in front of her face. "Details, Hiccup, I want details, you've just been so vague about this whole thing. Did he tell you anything, Scott?"

Snotlout was still glaring furiously at his feet. "Nope," he said, his voice popping on the 'p'.

Astrid laughed, casually taking Hiccup's hand in his, like she didn't somehow know that this would give him heart palpitations. "We took a few of the same classes together. He was always carrying too many books, and he never seemed to remember what the homework was - he was always asking me for it," she said, her voice light. "Later he told me it was just an excuse to talk to me."

Her eyes flickered over towards him, waiting for him to add to her statement. "Right?" she said, giving him a nudge.

“Oh, yeah,” Hiccup said, blinking like he’d been snapped out of his reverie. “Right.”

Get yourself together, Hiccup, he scalded himself inside his head. He racked his brains for something that he could add to the conversation.

“We got to talking and we were good friends,” he said, finally able to put a sentence together. He sent out a prayer to any god that was listening that his voice sounded normal. “We lost contact for a little while after university, but then we met again, and went from there.”

It must have been good enough for Val, who nodded and smiled at his answer, but Astrid was narrowing her eyes at him. She knew something was up.

“And how did you know you liked each other?” Val said, her elbows resting on the arms of the chair, her eyes glittering as a smile tugged at her lips.

Astrid smiled, her eyes flickering up at Hiccup. “He’s so smart and kind,” she said, her voice soft and her eyes shining. “And there’s really no one I’ve ever met who’s more caring than him.”

It was like she’d delivered him a few blows to the chest. The tightness in his stomach came flooding back, his throat dry as he stared at her, unable to move. She’d rendered him speechless, again, and she didn’t even know she’d done it.

It took him a few moments to realise that Val was looking at him expectantly.
“Sorry?” he mumbled, his voice barely there.

“I asked you what you liked about Astrid,” she said, still smiling like she didn’t realise anything was wrong.

Hiccup’s eyes flickered towards her and he opened his mouth, still unsure if any words would come out. “… was all he managed to say before his voice trailed away. He swallowed and tried again, his voice soft and gentle as he said: “It just felt right.”

There was a pause, while Val smiled and Astrid stared at him, her gaze like hot rays on his back, and he couldn’t, just couldn’t, keep sitting there anymore. He tore himself out of his seat, so suddenly that both Astrid and Val looked quite taken aback and the chair knocked backwards as Hiccup got to his feet.

They were staring at him now, blinking up at him. Even Snotlout had taken his eyes off his shoes to look at him.

"Are you alright, dear?” Val asked.

He blinked and composed himself just enough to say, "Yeah, yeah. Sorry. I just- need the toilet. I’ll be back.”

Val blinked, but nodded, and Hiccup took it as his cue to get the hell out of there.

He sped off inside, wrenched the door off the downstairs bathroom, and locked the door shut, crashing into the toilet.

God.

Everything was hot. It felt like his shirt was choking him, so he undid the top buttons and ran the tap, splashing himself with water. He stared at his face in the mirror, expecting to see something different, something else, a sign that his whole world had just been shaken up, but all he saw was his normal self, staring right back.

He had to get over this stupid kiss. It was only to shut Snotlout up. There was nothing real behind it, just fake feelings and the need to get one obnoxious boy to close his mouth. She'd heard all the things his cousin had been saying, she must have - he'd been so loud, he'd practically been yelling, all she'd done was what she had to, to get him to eat his words. That's all it was.

They were friends, the two of them, best friends, and that was all it was between them. He'd just been taken by surprise, that's all. This would go away. This would all die down.

But then, the memory of Astrid's lips on his, their fingers interlocked, her hands running through his hair all comes flooding back, and Hiccup's heart threatened to jump straight out of his chest.

No, he thought. This is wrong.

He didn’t feel this way about her, he didn’t feel any way about her, other than she was his friend. His friend.

Someone banged on the door, and Hiccup snapped out of his reverie, did the buttons on his shirt, and left the bathroom, ready to fake composure.

"You alright?” Astrid said in his ear, after he’d returned to the patio.

Her fingers brushed his and he felt his chest go tight again.
"Yeah," he said, and he put on the best smile he could muster. "Just fine."

God, he was in so much trouble.

Now that he was back out here, and she was in his space again, with every second it became more and more clear. He couldn't help but focus on her, everyone else becoming a blur around him, like there was a spotlight on Astrid and she was all that he could see.

They’d always been friends, he’d only ever thought of her as a friend, nothing else. Of course, he’d always known that she was pretty, that was just a fact, he couldn’t help but notice the way her hair parted perfectly and her eyes were always shining. And he’d known that she was smart and funny, anyone who had spent any time with her could see that. And she always knew what to say to him, always knew how to pull him out of a funk. And she was the first person he wanted to see when things went right because he knew that she would be thrilled for him, and she was the first person he wanted to see when things went wrong, because somehow she’d know how to fix it, and if she didn’t, she’d be there to help him put the broken pieces back together.

Oh.

Oh.
In the aftermath of what Hiccup was already referring to in his head as The Worst Realization Ever™, he’d snuck off for a little alone time while he tried to get some peace of mind. All at once, it seemed as if Hiccup’s life had been separated out into two chunks: Before the kiss, and after. His head was fuzzy, his stomach was a mess, and somehow, he needed to figure out how to function in this new post-kiss world.

He only felt a little bit of guilt at passing Astrid off to his mother: She’d been engrossed in something Val was saying anyway, and didn’t seem to mind so much when Hiccup told her that she should meet him later – letting him go with a smile and a nod. He’d wandered through the garden, eventually perching on the patio wall, nursing a drink in his hand, tapping his heels against the wall, wondering what on Earth he was supposed to do now.

"My God, you've got it bad."

Hiccup's limbs tensed, and his drink sloshed out of the cup as he whipped around to see Heather standing on the patio behind him, one eyebrow raised and her lips twisted into a smirk.

"How do you do that?" Hiccup muttered.

"Do what?"

"Y’know -" Hiccup flapped his hand in the air. "Appear out of nowhere."

Heather grinned, green dressing swinging around her hips as she jumped down off the patio wall, landing lightly on her feet and then hopping back up to sit next to him. "It's a gift," she said. "And it's not my fault you're not very observant."

"Ha," Hiccup said, his voice dry. "And what do you mean, 'I've got it bad'?"

"You know what I mean," Heather said, and then, as an afterthought, added, "Your girlfriend," as if it were an explanation.

"What about her?"

Heather rolled her eyes. "When you look at her, it's like you're seeing her for the very first time. Your eyes go all soft and your face does this dopey half-smile thing."

"No, I don't." Hiccup’s voice was almost a grumble as he hid his face behind his cup.

"Oh, trust me, Hiccup, you do," Heather said. "It's actually quite sickening."

He scowled.

"Don't look at me like that." Heather nudged him in the arm. "I'm just teasing. It's nice to see you so in love."

The word made Hiccup's breath hitch. Love? He'd barely started to unpick all the twisted knots in his stomach to try and figure out exactly how he felt about Astrid; adding the word love into the mix was a whole other set of strings.
He said nothing, choosing instead to tap his feet against the patio wall.

"That kiss though," Heather continued, her voice light and completely oblivious to the inner maelstrom of complicated feelings she was causing. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Hiccup's feet stopped tapping. "You saw that?"

"Uh, yeah?" Heather said, raising her eyebrows. "Couldn't help seeing. You guys had your tongues down each other's throats in the middle of the garden."

Hiccup groaned, lifting his legs up to rest on the patio wall and burying his head into his knees. "Was it really that bad?" he mumbled, his voice muffled.

“You were like a pair of octopuses,” Heather said cheerfully. “I thought I was going to have to pull you apart from each other.”

He cringed. God, he was going to have to find some way to get this under control.

"Anyway, where is the fine lady we speak of?" Heather said, craning her neck so that she could see over the crowd of people. "Oh, there she is. Talking to Tuffnut."

Hiccup's head emerged from where it had been hidden behind his knees. Heather grinned when she noticed the movement, and her mouth twisted into a smirk as she said: “Oh, did he just put his arm around her?”

Hiccup sprung onto his feet, his cup toppling over and spilling out all over the grass, but he barely noticed while he stood on his tip-toes to look over the crowd. “Where?” he said, his voice a little more like a demand than a question.

Heather snorted.

"There is nothing subtle about you, Hiccup Haddock,” she said, in lieu of an answer.

Hiccup wasn’t listening to Heather anymore – he’d slipped off the wall and was wandering down towards where Tuffnut and Astrid were talking.

“You don’t have to worry about him, you know Tuffnut’s not interested in any of that kind of stuff,” Heather said, an amused smile playing across her lips. Then, she raised her voice a little bit so that he’d hear her, now halfway across the garden. “It’s his sister you have to worry about!”

He tuned out her twinkling laughter as he strode across the garden.

“So, anyway, we’re thinking like maybe a few prototypes at first, y’know, just to see how the market it likes it, and then we’ll start manufacturing them.” Tuffnut was draped against the wall, gesturing manically while he talked, gabbling like he couldn’t get the words out fast enough. Astrid shifted from foot to foot, her arms folded while she nodded and smiled politely. “Oh, hi, Hiccup.”

“Hey,” Hiccup said, slinking an arm around Astrid’s waist. “Mind if I steal my girlfriend for a moment?”

It was only second after he’d said it that he realized that Tuffnut probably wasn’t chatting Astrid up, and now that she was looking up at him with one hand on her hip and an amused smile on his face, he was starting to regret his decision a little bit.

“No problemo,” Tuffnut said, shooting finger guns at him. “I gotta go find my sister, anyway.”
He did an elaborate twirl on the tip of his toes as he turned away and headed into the house. Hiccup dreaded to think about what kind of a mess he and his twin might be making in there.

Astrid raised an eyebrow up at him. “So, what was that all about?”

“Nothing,” Hiccup said, a little too quickly. “Just trying to rescue you. Tuffnut tends to go on a lot. It’s hard to make him stop.”

“Oh, so you weren’t marking your territory then?”

The pair of them jumped as Heather put her a hand on each of their shoulders, green eyes glittering as she waited for an answer to her question, putting no effort at all into hiding the grin on her face.

Hiccup’s face burned, his cheeks turning bright red. “I wasn’t – it wasn’t – I just-” he stammered, before linking his arm through Astrid’s and leading her away. “C’mon, let’s find somewhere to sit.”

Behind them, he could hear Heather laughing.

As the activities began to slow down, and family members began to get less and less interested in grilling them about their relationship, the pair found themselves curled up on a blanket in the corner of the garden, shaded by the branches of the trees. Hiccup lay on his back, one hand behind his head and one on his stomach as he stared up at the tree above them. The sun was poking through the leaves, pushing through and shining down on the two of them, like their own personal halo. Astrid was sat cross-legged, periodically poking him in the stomach.

"Oh my God," Hiccup whined after the seventh time she'd poked him. "Please stop, I'm begging you."

Astrid laughed. "How much will you pay me?"

"I'll write you into my will."

Astrid considered this carefully, tipping her head to the side as if weighing up the options. "Fair enough,” she said, and she slid down onto her back, joining him on the picnic blanket. "I hope you realise that I'm holding you to that."

"I'd expect nothing less from you."

"I'm serious," she said, grinning. "There better not be any hiccups with the admin."

"Oh my God," Hiccup groaned again, turning over onto his side. "You're the worst person on the whole wretched planet."

He didn't mean that. Actually, he meant the opposite.

"And I'll carry that title with pride," she said, gleefully.

His back was facing her, but he could still feel her eyes on him. Her gaze felt like it was burning into his skin. The more time that passed between the kiss, the calmer Hiccup had been feeling. Or least, the more he felt like the world wasn’t just about shatter around his ankles. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop his skin from pricking when she looked at him, especially
when she was staring at him so intently, like she was now.

"Hiccup," she mumbled, after a few moments had passed. “Can I ask you something?"

"Mmm?"

"Why are you so worried about disappointing your parents?"

Her voice was a little softer, slightly apprehensive, like she wasn't so sure how he'd react to the question.

Hiccup turned over again and stared at her. "Why do you ask?"

"It's just... the way you talked about them made them seem so strict," she said slowly, before glancing over to where Stoick and Val were dancing in the middle of the garden, the two lost in each other. "But they're not, they're so nice..."

Her voice trailed away as Hiccup pursed his lips.

"I'm sorry," she said, quickly. "Was that rude?"

"No, it's just..." Hiccup sat up slowly, crossing his legs and sitting opposite Astrid. "Mum and Dad were always so... successful, I guess. Y'know, Dad has his business and Mum's written so many books, I've lost count. And like, everyone around me growing up would always talk about how great they are."

Astrid nodded, still listening, all of her attention on him.

"And they are," Hiccup added, hastily. "But, it's just everyone kept going on about what a family I'd been born into. And Dad had always had this big idea about what a Haddock was."

He mimicked his father's voice, putting on a gruff accent. "We Haddock men are strong, Hiccup. Haddock men are brave."

Astrid hid a smile behind her hand. Hiccup's expression shifted then, from mockery to something a little sadder. "And then he got me, a scruffy, skinny art student. I can't do all of the things Dad wants me to because of my leg—" Astrid's eyes flickered down to his prosthetic as he said it, "— and I'm hardly living up to their standard."

Astrid frowned. “How do you know you’re not?” she asked.

He gave a sigh. "Dad was in the beginnings of making his business when he was my age," he said. “He and Mum were already together. Mum was about to publish her first book. Meanwhile, I’m earning next to nothing and I haven’t got any plans for the future, nor have I ever really had a proper relationship, until you, and well, we both know the problem with that.”

“Hiccup, that doesn’t mean they’re disappointed in you,” Astrid said quietly.

“Sometimes I feel like all of the extended family are looking at me and thinking ‘who does this kid think he is?’” he mumbled.

“Hiccup...” Astrid said, softly.

Her hand found its way to his shoulder, and as usual, he felt goose bumps prickle across his skin at her touch.

“You know that you don’t have to define yourself by what your parents have done, right?” she
said. “And just because you’re not exactly like them doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you.”

Hiccup’s fingers curled into the blanket material. He was about to open his mouth and say something more, but he was interrupted by his mother shouting from the top of the garden.

"Hiccup!" Val's voice could be surprisingly loud when she wanted it to be, and it projected all the way across the garden, right down to their shady little patch. She threw her arm in the air to wave him over, not stopping until he and Astrid were nearly at the house.

She was breathless and smiling when they got there. "Hiccup," she said, "Your grandfather wants to say hello."

"Grandpa's here?" Hiccup said, his mouth dropping open. "I thought he couldn't leave Berk."

"The trip took it out of him," Val said, running a hand through her hair with a sheepish smile. "He's been napping for most of the day. I didn’t want to get your hopes up, in case he wasn’t well enough to say hello. But he's here now. Let me go and get him, he'd love to meet Astrid."

Val disappeared back into the house.

Hiccup turned to Astrid, a thrilled look on his face. "I haven't seen Old Wrinkly in over a year," he said, a grin stretching from ear to ear.

"Old Wrinkly?" Astrid muttered. "Don't tell me that's another nickname."

Hiccup grinned. "Alright, I won't say anything."

"That's not a nickname, Hiccup, that's just rude," Astrid said, rolling her eyes, and then, as a mumbled afterthought: "Although, if this day's anything to go by I should have expected nothing less."

"He likes the name, Astrid, he's the one that came up with it."

"If you say so."

"Val, my dear, this next few years are going to be happy for you," a voice came from the house. "Especially after today."

"He calls himself a soothsayer," Hiccup muttered out of the corner of his mouth to Astrid, by way of an explanation "He thinks he can tell the future."

"Can he?"

"I've got absolutely no idea."

Astrid held in a laugh, and Hiccup rushed over to help his grandfather out of the house.

He was a small man, and thin too, most of his face taken up by a coiffed moustache and a curled goatee, his light blue eyes lost in the wrinkles in his skin. They were kind eyes, the kind that twinkled when he smiled.

"Hiccup!" he said, his voice full of warmth. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Old Wrinkly, I've missed you."

Hiccup led him further out into the sun.
"And who is this?" the old man said, his eyes flickering up and down as he looked up at Astrid.

"This is my girlfriend, Astrid."

"Oh," Old Wrinkly said, and looked up at her with the kindest smile she had ever seen. He held out one withered hand for her to shake. "You're as lovely as I knew you would be."

Astrid smiled. "It's lovely to meet you."

The man nodded, and looked at her intensely, his other hand covering hers. "You shouldn't listen to the man in the hat," he said, holding her gaze.

"Oh, uh—" Astrid shot a look at Hiccup, but he didn't seem concerned by the man's strange words, hiding a smile behind his hand. "I'll be sure not to."

As he released her hands, she turned to Hiccup and offered him a smile. "I'm going to make sure no one steals our blanket. Meet me when you're ready?"

Hiccup nodded, pleased to have a moment alone with his grandfather. He helped him settle into a chair, and almost as soon as he was sat down, Old Wrinkly began rifling through his pockets, pulling out his pipe and tobacco.

"Don't let Mum see you with that," Hiccup said, a small grin on his face. "You know she doesn't approve."

"Pshaw," the man said, waving a hand in front of his face. "I'm old. She can't tell me what to do."

As if to prove a point, he blew a smoke ring into the air. The two of them watched as it floated across the garden until it disintegrated into nothing.

"She's a good one you've got there," Old Wrinkly said, gesturing over to where Astrid was settling down onto a blanket. "You shouldn't let her go."

Hiccup had a feeling that Old Wrinkly meant it as more than just a well-wish for their relationship.

"I know," Hiccup said, chewing on his lower lip.

"Foolish boy," the man said, bringing the pipe back up to his lips again. "Why are you here chatting to old man when you could be with her?"

"I haven't seen you all year!"

The old man looked down at Hiccup with a very stern eye. "You and I have all the time in the world, my boy," he said. "And if I am correct, you and her only have a day."

"Yeah, but-"

"No buts, now scat!"

Hiccup hopped to his feet and turned to leave.

"Oh, and Hiccup?"

"Yeah?"

"Avoid sleeping on sofas," Old Wrinkly said, cryptically. "No matter what kind of a situation
you're in."

With that confusing statement, the man nodded off. Hiccup covered his lap with a blanket, before hurrying off after Astrid.

Afternoon drifted slowly into evening, the house and the garden bathed in a deep orange glow as the sun began to dip below the horizon. Val took a match and lit all the tea lights that Hiccup and Astrid had put in the trees, and they were like stars, twinkling in the dim light.

Hiccup and Astrid were lying on their backs in the grass, tired from a day of dancing and socialising, staring up at the changing sky. Hiccup could barely concentrate – as much as he had calmed down after his uncomfortable revelation a few hours before, being around Astrid felt a little bit like he'd been wired up with electricity. He could have sworn that his skin sparked every time she touched him.

"It was a good day," Astrid mumbled, turning onto her side, and then lowered her voice for the next part. "Thanks for bringing me, even if it wasn't in the way everyone thought it was."

Hiccup felt a pang in his heart at that.

"I should be thanking you for going along with this ridiculous scheme with me," he said, shifting his hands so that they supported the back of his head, as he held his gaze up at the sky.

In the past few hours, he'd found it difficult to look Astrid. He felt like everything he'd been thinking must be written all over his face, and god knows Astrid could never know how he was feeling. That would be the quickest way to wrecking their friendship, and that was the most precious thing to Hiccup; if there was anything in this world he could lose, it certainly wasn't that.

Astrid let out a long yawn, stretching her arms around.

"Don't worry," Hiccup said. "We can go home soon."

"Back to normal Hiccup and Astrid," she mumbled, letting her eyes flutter shut. "'M not sleeping. Just resting my eyes."

Hiccup's smile was fond. "Of course you are," he said.

She looked so peaceful, lying there on their shared blanket, wisps of blonde hair across her face, mouth slightly parted. It took everything in Hiccup not to reach out and tuck a piece of stray hair behind her ear.

All at once, Hiccup began to wonder how he ever thought he could possibly feel any other way about her, because right now, in the honey glow light, all he could focus on was the way his heart had sped up a little and his face had flushed.

"Quit staring at me, Edward Cullen," she muttered, her eyes still closed.

Hiccup couldn't help the smile that tugged on his lips. Of course she'd noticed him looking. Of course she had.

A nagging voice in his head told him that he should make the best of this moment, sitting there in the low-light with her, because after tonight, he'd probably never be this close to her again. There was an uncomfortable jolt in his stomach at that thought, so he slipped down onto his back again
and felt himself sink into the floor.

No matter how hard he tried to keep his eyes on the sky, his gaze always managed to slip back to Astrid, content just to be close to her for just a little while longer.

But it had been a long day, and it had all started to catch up with him. His body had already started to betray him, his eyes aching the more he tried to keep them open. Eventually, his breathing slowed, his eyes slipped shut, and he felt himself gently fall asleep.

He didn't quite manage to reach the point of sleep though, because he was woken by his father's loud voice.

"Just wanted to say a few words."

Stoick was standing in the middle of the garden again, clapping his hands and clearing his voice, gathering the whole crowd's attention. The party had lulled a little, everyone going off to their corners, sitting on picnic blankets and polishing off the last of the food, listening intently to gentle conversations or falling asleep in the grass. It didn't take long to get everyone's attention. Beside him, Astrid had woken up and was sitting up gently, crossing her legs.

"So, I just want to say how happy I am to be able to share another reunion with you guys," Stoick said, projecting his voice so that it reached every corner of the garden. Hiccup had always been impressed at how he could do that, a skill that he had never quite mastered. "Every single one of you has made today very special!"

At that, everyone cheered and clapped, smiling up at Stoick.

"It was all you!" someone yelled. "You're the one who organised it!"

Everyone laughed. Hiccup couldn't help but agree. For all of his parents' faults, they did know how to throw an excellent party.

Stoick smiled, but held up his hands for quiet so that he could carry on speaking.

"As you all know," Stoick said, reaching out a hand to pull Val up to her feet, "Val and I have been together for 35 years."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, a huge grin on his face as he looked down on the crowd. “And we never got married.”

Hiccup sat up straighter, his eyes widening as he stared up at his father. “No way…” he mumbled.

Astrid blinked at him. “What’s going on?” she said quietly, but Hiccup didn’t seem to hear her, too busy gaping at his parents.

“So, we’ve decided that we’re ready,” Stoick said, his eyes glittering.

Val grinned. “It’s been a long time coming,” she said.

“Val and I have been together for 35 years.”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, a huge grin on his face as he looked down on the crowd. “And we never got married.”

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“So, we’ve decided that we’re ready,” Stoick said, his eyes glittering.

Val grinned. “It’s been a long time coming,” she said.

“We’ve had and brought up a kid,” Stoick said, raising his glass towards Hiccup, who was too stunned to react.

“So you see, we’ve given this a lot of thought, and we both agree, we’re ready to take the next step,” Val said, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

“Yeah, we’ve thought long and hard about this.”
It was Val who delivered the last line, and by now everyone knew what was coming. “We’re finally getting married!”

The whole garden went wild, everyone cheering and whooping. Several people wolf-whistled.

Hiccup just looked dazed.

“We’ve been planning this for a long time now, and the one thing we both really wanted was to hold the wedding in the place we both fell in love,” Val said. “Back in the place where we grew up, where all of our family are. So, for the next month, we’ll be returning home to Berk.”

More shrieking filled the air, everyone gathered around Stoick and Val, clapping them on the back and offering their congratulations, each person talking loudly over each other.

Hiccup stayed still, completely thrown by the events.

But nothing could prepare him for what his mother was about to say.

“And we were also hoping that Hiccup, who doesn’t know anything about this, would join us for this next month. So, we bought two tickets for him to come home with us, as a holiday. One for him, and one for his very lovely new girlfriend!” she said, pointing out towards where he and Astrid were standing.

A thousand swear words ran through Hiccup’s head at once, as every family member at the reunion turned to smile and clap at the two of them.

But the worst of it came when he turned back to look at Astrid in panic, and saw her face.

She looked furious.
After Stoick and Val had made their shock announcement, the crowds of people had descended upon them, each of them coming forward to clap him on the back and shake his hand, as if somehow Hiccup had been a part of keeping the secret, like he wasn't just as stunned as everyone else at that party. It wasn't long before he'd been swarmed by the crowd, stuck in the thick of it, and before long he realised that Astrid was nowhere to be found. He stood on his tip-toes and craned his neck trying to find her, but no matter what he did, he couldn't catch hide nor hair of her.

She'd always been good at disappearing.

"Isn't this exciting?" someone enthused next to him, clasping his shoulder. "I never thought your old man would ever want to tie the knot."

"Me neither," Hiccup said absent-mindedly, still trying to locate Astrid in the crowd of people. He lifted himself onto his toes, and finally he spotted her: or at least, he spotted a flash of blonde hair slipping through the French windows and into the house.

Hiccup didn't want waste anytime pushing through the swathes of people to get to her, but try as he might, he couldn't get past without people pulling him aside to congratulate him, like somehow he was the one getting married.

"Did you know about this? How did you keep it a secret?"

"I didn't know," Hiccup mumbled, his attention focused on the house, trying to see if he could catch a glimpse of Astrid, anything at all.

"How did your parents manage to keep it from you?" the woman said. "Ah, you Haddocks. I'll never know what goes on in your heads."

Hiccup laughed politely. "If you could just excuse me..."

He kept pushing his way through the crowd, past his parents, ignoring their greetings when they saw him coming and made a break for it.

He was almost at the house when someone took a hold of his hand, shaking it vigorously. In his head, Hiccup gave a long exasperated sigh and tried not to recoil. He'd never been a fan of people he didn't know well touching his personal space - "why is shaking hands a thing," he'd frequently moaned to Astrid while she bit back a smile.

He turned and plastered on a polite smile, ready to humour whoever wanted to talk to him, whilst also get rid of them when something metal brushed against his skin, and he froze.

When he turned his head and looked up, Hiccup realised that he was shaking the clammy hand of Alvin the Treacherous, held still while his hook brushed across the back of his hand. *How was it possible for this man to disappear and reappear out of thin air?*

"What a wonderful surprise," Alvin said, his eyes glittering in the sun. "How nice that your parents decided to buy a ticket for you and your girlfriend."

"They're very generous people," Hiccup said, raising his head and forcing himself to stare straight
into Alvin's dark eyes, even though it left him with a cold feeling inside.

"They certainly are," Alvin said. "I only hope they don't live to regret it."

“They won't,” Hiccup said sharply. He tried to pull his hand away, but Alvin held it steady.

“I believe your girl just passed through here,” Alvin said. “You know, she looked rather upset.”

Hiccup blinked. He didn’t trust the man as far as he could throw him, but his thoughts were far too focused on Astrid to care. “Where?”

Alvin let Hiccup’s hand go and jammed a thumb towards the house. Hiccup turned and ran into the house, all too aware of Alvin’s eyes, boring into his back as he watched him leave.

He found her on the front lawn, her skirt bunched up around her knees while she sat cross-legged on the floor, her hands curled up in the grass, tugging clumps of it out of the ground. Hiccup stared at her for a moment and pursed his lips, before shuffling over to join.

“They should hire you as a gardener.”

His hands clasped his forearms as he sank down to join her, awkwardly shifting his legs around to sit in the grass. Astrid said nothing and shot him a glare, her fingers leaving the grass and dusting down on her dress. She stared stony-faced down at her hands, her fingers drumming on her knees.

Hiccup sighed. “Come on, Astrid. Talk to me.”

“It was only supposed to be for one day,” Astrid said. “You promised.”

Her voice was sharp and cross, words like daggers, and Hiccup’s insides squeezed, his thoughts running away on an anxiety spiral that he’d long since learned to control, but now was rearing its ugly head. It was the familiar old feeling of panic that he used to get when someone was mad at him, and already there was a sheen of sweat across his palms, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to think of something to say.

He raked a hand through his hair. "I know, Astrid, I'm sorry," he said. "I had no idea they were going to do this. I had no idea they were even getting married. They didn't tell me anything about it."

His voice had reached a ramble now, too eager to get as many words out as possible, to apologise, to share his side, to get her to listen. He closed his eyes, as he’d always done before in times like this, and took a breath.

"A day is fine, Hiccup, we can't keep this up for a month," Astrid said, her fist clenching and unclenching. "What are we supposed to do? Just keep lying to them?"

"No, we don't," Hiccup said and he swallowed, opening his mouth to say something more, but he was interrupted.

“'We've got jobs, Hiccup, we can't just fly off somewhere and ignore our responsibilities, for the sake of a pretend relationship,' she said.

She tilted her head back, letting out a long sigh a clear sign she had nothing else to say, leaving the quiet to fall down upon them once more. Behind them, there was the dull hum of mixed up voices,
the party still going on; they could still hear the cheering and clapping, and someone had turned the stereo back on: the tension between them now had a backing track.

Hiccup pulled his legs up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, lifting up his chin and resting it on his knees. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have dragged you into this,” he said, his voice cracking. “If I’d known they were going to do this, then I’d have…”

His voice trailed away, and when he looked up, he could see Astrid glaring at him, her brow furrowed.

“I’m not upping and leaving for a month, not for whatever this is,” she said, flapping a hand between the two of them. “I signed up for a day, Hiccup. Not for more.”

It pained Hiccup to say the words, but he couldn't do this to Astrid, she was too important for him to lose. "I'm going to tell them the truth, right now. Whatever they say, I'll take it, even if they're really upset. Even if I have to listen to Snotlout's teasing for the rest of my life."

"They already bought a ticket," Astrid said, her voice lowering in pitch. "What are you going to do about that?"

"I'll pay them back for it," Hiccup said, with finality.

Astrid's face softened at that, and she unfolded her arms, her voice much more gentle as she spoke. "You don't have the money for it."

"I'll figure something out," he said, fiercely, his eyes blazing as they stared right back into hers. "I was the one that dragged you into this, you shouldn't have to stay because I got you into this mess."

"Even if it drains your bank account?" Astrid said.

"Even if."

It was a quiet again. Astrid’s faced was changed in the evening glow, no longer torn and angry but somehow soft. Her teeth worried against her bottom lip, and in the moment, with the last golden slivers of sunlight illuminating her face, Hiccup found himself resisting the urge to slide his hand under her hair, pull her close and kiss her.

"Okay," she said.

Her voice brought him out of his daydream, and he blinked twice, before he came back to his senses and said, "Okay, I'll tell my parents, we'll show our faces once more, and then we can leave."

They rose slowly from their place on the floor and went back towards the house. Astrid had offered him small smile, but it still didn’t feel quite right – she was clutching her arm in the way that she always did when she wasn’t quite happy, and her fringe had slipped in front of her eyes without her pushing it away. For the first time that whole day, she looked like she didn’t belong.

He took his place at her side, and their shoulders brushed. Hiccup found the urge to take hold of her hand bubbling up inside him, but he pushed the thoughts down deep.

As they reached the French doors, ready to head back out into the garden, a voice in the hallway stopped him.
While Hiccup hung back, Astrid stepped out into the garden, wincing a little at the brightness of the sun after being in the darkness of the house. She put a hand over her eyes, took a few steps out onto the patio, only to bump straight into Val.

"Mrs. Haddock!" Astrid exclaimed, her hand shooting away from her forehead. "Sorry! I was just-"

"Val, please, Astrid, Mrs. Haddock makes me feel so old," Val said, smiling and sinking down into a deckchair, patting the one next to her. "Besides, I’m not technically Mrs. Haddock, yet. Where’s my son?"

"He went to find you and Stoick," Astrid said, one hand resting on her other arm, stroking circles into her skin, her little nervous tic. "I can go and get him."

She shifted her weight onto the back of her foot, ready to flee back into the safety of the house and the company of Hiccup, but Val interrupted her before she could. "Actually, it was you I was looking for," she said.

Astrid hovered, glancing over her shoulder to look back through the French doors for Hiccup, but there was no sign of him. He’d disappeared along with whoever had called him over. She looked back over at Val, who was still giving her that same, warm smile. "Me?"

"Yes," Val said. "Please take a seat."

She dropped down onto the chair, sitting up straight, her hands resting primly on her knees, the wooden slats of the seat uncomfortable against her bare legs.

Sometimes, when Hiccup talked about his parents, he made them sound like monsters. He’d made them seem like they were cold and hard to impress: always disappointed and never satisfied. She’d come prepared, ready to square her shoulders and hold her own against the judgement she’d expected to get dished out, but she’d seen none of that. Val and Stoick had shown nothing but the upmost kindness to her, and both of them had done their very best to make her feel welcome in their home, always concerned that she was having a good time.

But now, with Val sitting next to her and Hiccup off somewhere else, Astrid was starting to get the very same intimidated feel that Hiccup must be talking about. Somehow, she felt like Val knew what she was thinking: like she knew that this whole relationship was a façade, designed to pull wool over her eyes. She couldn’t help but wonder what Val must think of her now.

Val offered Astrid a smile, but it did little to quell the unease that was festering in her stomach. She took a breath, preparing for the worst.

"I just wanted to make sure that you weren't overwhelmed by all of this," Val said.

Astrid blinked. "I know we can be a very boisterous family," Val said. "There are a lot of us, we're all very loud. I just wanted to make sure that didn't feel uncomfortable by any of us."

Astrid was quiet for a moment, swallowing before she replied, "it's okay, Mrs Haddock-"

"Val, please."
"-Val. My family's not that much different. It's just that... It's a shock. I've got a job, I wasn't expecting to just... leave for a month, I guess," Astrid said.

Val nodded. "I understand that. I'm sorry for springing all of this on you, it was Stoick's idea to surprise Hiccup. Perhaps it wasn't the best idea," she said, tapping her fingers on her lap, "maybe we shouldn't have meddled. We thought that maybe the two of you might want some time off together, but we should have asked first. We were just really happy that Hiccup found someone."

Astrid stared down at her feet, unsure of what to say. There was a silence that lasted for a long moment.

"He's very fond of you, you know," Val said, breaking the silence and turning to smile down at her. "I can tell that he likes you very much."

Astrid stilled, her mouth suddenly felt dry, and she swept her tongue across her lips before speaking again. "I like him a lot too," she said, her voice low. She couldn't bring herself to look at Val, her gaze still fixed on her feet.

"You know, I don't think I've ever seen him as happy as he was today."

That brought Astrid out of her freeze frame. Her head lifted up slowly, and she stared at Val.

"I've only known you a day," Val said. "But I've never seen anyone who makes him as happy as you do. He's been so lonely for years. We'd be thrilled if you would join us, even if it's not for the full month."

Astrid stopped still and went back to staring at her feet, no idea what she should say.

Stoick lead Hiccup to another room and turned on him, his hands on his hips.

"So, Hiccup, what's going on?" his father said, his voice stern.

"…What do you mean?"

"Look, I know we sprung this on you, but a congratulations would have been nice," Stoick said, folding his arms. "I thought you'd be happy."

"I am happy," Hiccup said. "Believe me, Dad, I'm thrilled, it's just this is all really sudden."

"We wanted it to be a surprise."

"I know, and I get that, it's just..." Hiccup said, his voice trailing away while he ran a hand through his hair. "I have a job. I can't just up and leave for a month. I needed some notice."

Stoick's face softened, and he sunk down onto a chair, putting his head into his hands. "I didn't think of that."

"And it's not fair on Astrid. We haven't been together that long. I don't want to put all this pressure on her," Hiccup said.

On the inside, Hiccup winced. The lies were rolling off his tongue again, so much easier than the truth. He could already hear the disappointment in his father’s voice, already see his father’s face dropping, his brow furrowing and his eyes darkening. Inside, there was a voice screaming *coward*, over and over again, he’d promised Astrid, he’d promised her that this would all be over soon, and hear he was spinning stories again, like they’d never even had the conversation.
"You're right, son, I'm sorry," Stoick said, softly. "We just really wanted you both to be part of it."

There was that pang in his stomach again. The irony of it all was that a part of Hiccup would be thrilled to spend a month with Astrid, to have her around all the time and take her to his parents' wedding, to have her hand in his and listen to her make fun of everyone’s nicknames. The idea appealed so much that it almost hurt.

But he couldn't do that to Astrid.

He'd dragged her into a mess of a situation, and asked her to do some things that he shouldn't have. He'd asked her to act for him, to lie for him, and to ask her to do it for longer, to keep up the lie, to pretend to be his girlfriend when she didn't want to be, was not fair. He couldn't do that to her.

"Dad," he said, swallowing and summoning up all his courage. "There's something I need to tell you."

Stoick raised an eyebrow, and Hiccup took a deep breath, ready to tell his father the whole truth. But he was interrupted.

"Stoick!" A voice came from behind them. "I just wanted to tell you congratulations, and how thrilled I am that you invited me!"

Astrid appeared from the other side of one of the French windows, Val behind her with a huge smile on her face. Astrid went to Hiccup, took his arm in hers and pressed a kiss to his shoulders. Hiccup just gaped at her, too stunned to move.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be possible to me stay for the whole month," Astrid said, her fingers threading through Hiccup's. "I have to give notice at my work. But I'd love to come for as long as possible."

Stoick eyes lit up and he rose from his seat, shifting over towards Val and put his arms around her. "Of course, lass. We'll make sure you can use the ticket whenever."

Hiccup stared down at Astrid, and realised his mouth was hanging wide open, so he put all of his effort into snapping it shut. His heart had sped up the moment she had touched him; he had assumed that as soon as this day was over, all of the touching and little kisses would go. Now that she was here, clinging onto his arm, he felt like he was drunk. All he wanted was more.

"This is wonderful," Val said, her grin stretching from ear to ear. "We can’t wait to have the both of you there."

Val and Stoick linked arms, the two of them smiling brightly at each other as they wandered back out into the garden. Hiccup and Astrid scurried after them.

“What are you doing?” Hiccup hissed in Astrid’s ear. “I thought…”

She hit him on the arm, not hard, a light tap of the back of her hand, but it was enough to get him to stop talking. He was met with a resounding glare and a sharp jerk of her head towards where his parents were standing, just a few feet away. Hiccup got the message, and pressed his mouth shut. Instead, he took the arm that she offered, and together, they followed his parents out into the sunlight.
He so desperately wanted to ask what it was that made her change her mind.

She’d been so adamant before, so opposed to the idea that they’d be taking this one day only special onto a month’s round trip tour, and now she was clinging on his arm, her fingers threaded with his and her cheek pressed against his shoulder, playing the game and faking it just as strongly as they had been before, if not stronger.

He wanted to ask so badly, but every time he opened his mouth to speak, they were accosted by some other family member, just like they had been all night – only now they were more interested because of the new development.

Hiccup had held out some hope that maybe they would all be too interested in Stoick to bother Astrid too much – he was worried that she was going to get overwhelmed by all the attention and snap – but not matter how much he tried to subconsciously tell people to back off, they all seemed far too interested in her anyway, much to Hiccup’s chagrin. It wasn’t fair what he had done, and he regretted the position he’d put her in, especially after their little spat. It was clear to him now how uncomfortable with all of this she was.

So why was she clinging onto his arm for dear life, pressing kisses to his cheek and answering questions with a smile like she’d never been happier?

For possibly the hundredth time that day, Hiccup wished he could know what was going on in Astrid’s head.

It didn’t matter anyway. If there was one thing he was sure of, it was that Astrid’s every move was a calculated one, adding to their little deception, entirely, utterly fake. Her reaction had proved everything: the way her brow had furrowed, and the way she’d snapped, told him everything he needed to know and though it caused a pang in his chest and an ever-growing pit in his stomach, he had to accept it: Astrid hated the thought of pretending to be in a relationship with him. The very idea must make her lip curl and her shoulder’s hunch: he had to accept that there was no way Astrid would ever like him the way he was starting to realise he liked her, and he wasn’t going to cross that line.

He would not be the one who ruined their friendship.
"You didn't have to do that."

The road ahead was dark; the way back from Hiccup’s parents was paved with a set of winding country lanes, hidden by large hedges that blocked out any hope of a decent view, and it was lit only by the headlights of Hiccup’s car. Astrid had long since slid her shoes off, but this time her feet were on seat rather than on the dashboard, her knees pressed against her chest. She was working her fingers across her bare toes, as if she’d been walking for miles, not just sitting in a garden for a whole day.

Hiccup kept his eyes on the road, but he couldn’t help himself from sneaking glances back over towards her. The whole situation with his parents kept running through his head, and he couldn't seem to stop thinking about the conversation they’d had - he could still feel Astrid clasping his arm, still hear her voice agreeing to go with them to Berk.

Stoick and Val had been delighted, instantly perking up and making plans, telling her everything that they wanted to see or do while on the island, telling her with bright confidence - "You're going to love it!" - all while Astrid kept up the polite smile she’d been using all day. Something about that whole situation made Hiccup's stomach twist with guilt.

Astrid shifted in her seat, her side resting on the back of the seat as she turned to face Hiccup.

"Is that how she talked to you before?" she asked softly, her voice breaking through the long silence they’d had.

"About what?"

"About bringing a date," Astrid said. "Looking like she was going to cry. Like you having someone special in your life made her happier than she's ever been?"

Hiccup's eyes flickered over towards her before darting back to the road. "Oh," was all he managed to say.

"I couldn't say no to her, Hiccup," Astrid said, her voice very small. "I didn't know how to."

Hiccup kept his eyes fixed on the road. "I know the feeling."

Quiet again. Neither of them talked, and for a while, all that could be heard was the sound of the car, trundling down the road.

Hiccup's eyes kept sliding over towards her.

"You don't have to do this," he said. "I can still tell her that it didn't work out. We don't have to keep this up. They're not expecting us for another two weeks or so anyway, so I can just go alone and say that it didn't work."

A pause.

"Are you lonely?"

Her voice was so soft, he barely heard it, and it made his stomach jolt. Hiccup took his eyes off
the road for a few long moments to stare at her.

"What?" he said, eloquently.

It wasn’t at all what he had expected her to say, and he had no idea how to respond.

Astrid rearranged her seatbelt so that she could comfortably tuck her legs around underneath her. "Just something your mother said."

Hiccup gave a short laugh and shook her head. "You shouldn't listen to her. She thinks I'll be alone forever if I'm not married by twenty-five."

But the answer didn't seem satisfying for Astrid. Her small eyes were narrowed, and even in the darkness he could feel her staring at him, and as they lapsed into silence, Hiccup resolved to keep his eyes fixed on the road. Shadows of trees and hedges passed by outside, and he tried to focus on them, but no matter what he did, he couldn't shake the feeling of Astrid staring at him from the other seat.

"When was the last time you had a date, a proper one?" she asked.

Hiccup sighed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been on a date. Perhaps sometime in university. He had vague recollections of taking one or two girls out for coffee, but he couldn't for the life of him remember any names or faces.

"Are you trying to set me up with someone?" he said, trying to keep his voice light.

Astrid shrugged. "Maybe."

Hiccup felt his throat go dry. How had the conversation turned to this?

"Trust me, Astrid, I don't need to be set up with anyone," he said.

Unless it's with you.

The words bubbled up inside him – over the course of the day, any romantic tryst he'd had before had faded into the background; whenever he tried to bring forth an image of anyone he'd like to date, all he saw was her face, shining like a beacon, and he had to forcibly put the thought out of his mind. She doesn't like you that way.

"Besides," Hiccup said, casting a look over towards her again, a small smile playing on his lips. "What would my parents say if they found out I was cheating on 'that very lovely girl you brought to the reunion'?"

Astrid grinned at that. "Yeah. I guess dating can wait for a month or two," she said, stretching her arms up in the air and letting out a long yawn, her head tipping back as she did so.

Hiccup swallowed. "That’s not… going to cause too many problems for you, is it?"

"Nah," Astrid said, breezily. "I was thinking I should take a break from it anyway."

All at once, Hiccup felt a mixture of relief and disappointment flipping over in his stomach, and then got angry with himself, his fingers gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white.

"Seriously though," Hiccup said, wondering how many times he could say this and feel like it was
enough – like he didn’t need to ask again, just to make sure. “You don’t have to do this.”

Astrid narrowed her eyes at him again, and Hiccup felt like he was under scrutiny. “Did you have fun today?”

He didn’t even have to think before he answered. “Yes.”

“And do you want keep this up?” Astrid asked.

“Only if you don’t mind,” Hiccup said.

Astrid rolled her eyes. “That wasn’t what I asked. Do you want to keep this up?”

He hesitated before answering the question. “Yes.”

Astrid leaned back into the seat, her fingers lacing together behind her head, a satisfied smile on her face. “Then I’ll do it,” she said. “Besides, your parents are nice, and I wouldn’t say no to a little break from work.”

“I can’t believe you would willingly want to spend time with my parents,” Hiccup said, shaking his head a little.

She raised an eyebrow. “Your parents are fine, Hiccup.”

She was about to say something more, but she was interrupted by a large yawn that rolled through her body, so instead she wriggled down into her seat, tucked her legs up by her chest again, and closed her eyes.

Not long after that, her breathing slowed and she was asleep.

It was quiet now in the car, and Hiccup felt the absence of Astrid’s voice deeply, replaced with gentle breathing and the occasional snore. The hour’s drive they still had to go to get back to the town they both lived in seemed to be taking forever now.

He couldn’t help but keep sneaking glances over towards her. Her sleeping face was lit up by the gentle blue glow of the clock on the dashboard, and he could just about make out her features in the soft light, small and peaceful. She looked so calm.

Somehow, it soothed Hiccup, and he found a small smile tugging at his lips. A stray piece of hair had slipped from Astrid’s bun across her face, and his hand itched to reach out and tuck it behind her ear, but he kept his hand solidly on the steering wheel, forcing himself not to move. He was not going to wake her, not if he could possibly help it.

The silence gave Hiccup time to think. A month until his parents were going to be married; a month of pretending to date Astrid Hofferson. Technically, it would only be the two weeks that they were visiting Berk for, but for the time before that, they couldn’t be seen with other dates, lest word get back to Stoick and Val that there was trouble in paradise.

It was starting to dawn on Hiccup just how grateful he was to Astrid that she was going along with this. He’d been prepared to own up to his parents, but when faced with his father, he’d frozen and found that he just couldn’t do it. Now, they’d go to the wedding and they’d make his parents happy, and then after the fuss died down, he could tell his parents the truth.

That was his plan, anyway.

Eventually, the lights of the city appeared in the distance, the road signs becoming familiar and the
long roads becoming familiar streets, until he'd turned off down a residential area that belonged to Astrid.

She still wasn't awake when he parked.

For a few moments, Hiccup sat still in the car, staring down at where Astrid was curled up in her seat, a mess of blonde hair starting to unravel from its bun and fan across her face. For a moment, Hiccup entertained a fantasy about sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to her door, bridal-style, and for a little while, he lost himself in his thoughts, too busy imagining the way that her sleeping head might loll against his chest, her ear close to his heartbeat, but he pushed the thought from his mind, and reached out to shake her shoulder, gently.

He probably couldn't carry her anyway.

Astrid's eyes slid open slowly, and for a moment she stared up at Hiccup with her eyes half-open, stuck in that phase of half-asleep and half-awake, just at the point of remembering where you are, and it was all Hiccup could do but keep himself from leaning down and kissing her softly. She shifted back up into her seat, stretching her joints.

"We're home," Hiccup mumbled.

It took a few more blinks for her to arrive back in the land of the living, but once she did, Astrid gathered her bag from where it was tangled around her feet and opened the door. Before she left, she stuck her head back in and in a high falsetto voice, she said, "I had such a lovely time!"

Hiccup grinned, and waved her away. "Get outta here."

He had to stop himself from getting out the car and walking her back to her flat. Make sure she got in okay. Kiss her goodnight.

Stop, he told himself forcefully. No one was watching them, his parents weren't around. If he did that, he'd no longer be faking something. He'd be crossing a line.

So he forced himself to sit still in the car, keeping hold of the steering wheel the whole time to make sure he didn't move.

"See ya, Hiccup," Astrid said, all sing-song, as she closed the door.

"See you, Astrid."

She swung off out of sight, into the block of flats.

Hiccup waited outside for a few minutes, counting down the time until he knew she'd be safe inside, and then he waited for a few minutes more before driving back to his own flat, letting the streetlamps guide his way home.

The dingy fluorescent lighting that lit up the hallway outside his flat was a stark contrast to the chandeliers that had lit up the Haddock home.

"Toothless!" he whined, as he slumped through his front door.

The cat was waiting expectantly at the door, blinking up at him.
"I'm in so much trouble," Hiccup said, dropping himself onto the floor and clutching Toothless to him.

Hiccup could have sworn that the cat rolled his eyes.

The day rewound in his head, every moment flashing through Hiccup's mind. His arm on Astrid's back. Astrid kissing him on the cheek. Astrid kissing him properly.

Hiccup felt like the memory of Astrid's lips on his would be seared there forever. He could still remember the way that she'd pulled him towards her, her hand running through his hair as they'd connected.

He'd thought that faking a relationship with Astrid Hofferson would be easy - pleasant, even - but now there was an ache in his heart and uneasiness in his stomach, sick with the feeling that nothing they did, not the kissing, not the touching, would ever be real. At least not on Astrid's part.

Astrid only saw him as a friend, and not for the first time that day, the thought made Hiccup's heart hurt.

He woke up in the morning still on the floor, a crick in his neck and with pins and needles in all of his limbs. Toothless was curled up next to him, fast asleep.

Hiccup met Monday morning with a grimace and a groan, shoving his pillow back over his head almost as soon as his alarm clock had started ringing. He'd spent Sunday tucked up in bed, his laptop wedged over his knees, while he marathoned Gilmore Girls and tried to forget about the feel of Astrid's lips on his. The show reminded him painfully of the argument that had started the whole thing, but it wasn't enough to deter Hiccup, and he felt rather petulant about the whole thing, almost as if he could hear Snotlout's judging voice

Screw you, Snotlout, he thought as he shoved another spoonful of ice cream into his mouth. I can do what I want.

He was absolutely not ready for Monday morning, and the thought of sitting at his desk and hunching over his graphics tablet filled him with the kind of dread he'd not felt since his primary school headmaster had called him into the office to discuss the damage to the playground after an incident involving a fire that was definitely nothing to do with him.

When he'd finally managed to pull himself out of bed, a half hour later than he should have been up, he looked at himself in the mirror and pulled a self-conscious hand through his unwashed hair before picking up a beanie and pulling it onto his head as an afterthought.

He thanks his stars they didn't have strict work uniforms. "Well, don't you look like microwaved shit?"

He'd been in the office for ten minutes waiting for his computer to wake up, nursing a coffee and trying to remind himself that he loved his job, when he'd been snuck up on.

He turned in his chair to see Cami grinning at him, her eyes glittering under the florescent lights. She was slouched in the chair behind him, her legs propped up over the side of the arms, her mop of blonde hair cascading down her shoulders.
"Jesus," Hiccup muttered, "you and Heather would make a perfect couple."

Cami quirked an eyebrow. "Who's Heather?"

"Friend from home."

"Oh," Cami said, her eyes lighting up in understanding, "you see her at the reunion?"

"Yup."

"Hope you treated my dear cousin well."

Hiccup didn't give that a response, he just swung back around on his chair to open up Photoshop and begin his work for the day.

"C'mon, Hiccup, you're not going to tell me anything about the reunion?"

He kept his eyes trained on the computer screen. "Nope."

He reached out a hand to pick up his stylus, and his hand fell through space, his tablet not where it should be. It had vanished from his table, no sign that it had even been there at all. For a moment he panicked. Was he going mad? It had been there before, hadn’t it?

And then he gave a long groan. “Cameron,” he muttered, turning around and flashing her a glare.

Astrid and Cameron Hofferson were cousins, but they could have been sisters. They were similar in more ways than Hiccup could count - too similar, if you asked him. They had the same features - the same bright blue eyes and blonde hair - only Cami's was far more unkempt and tangled, in a way that no hairbrush could ever tame; Hiccup had always thought that Cami was the wilder version of Astrid. She had dimples on either side of her face, that under any other circumstance would have made her look utterly cute, but when combined with her wild glittering eyes and curled smile left no other impression but that she was not to be messed with.

She was flashing that smile now, holding his tablet in one hand, and his stylus in the other, twirling it through her fingers.

Hiccup scowled and snatched them away from her.

"Right under your nose," she said, grinning madly.

He shoved the USB into the port and swung his chair around so that his back was to her. "That's going to get you into a lot of trouble one day."

He was faced away from her, but he knew she was still smiling. "Not if I don't get caught," she said in a sing-song voice.

"You're impossible."

"I try."

Her kleptomania aside, Hiccup enjoyed having Cami around, for the most part. She was good company, and always had been, especially when their deadlines were looming over and coming into work was the last thing he wanted to do. Hiccup had learned early on that the Hofferson girls were people he wanted in his life.

But today was a different story. After the weekend he'd had, Hiccup would have been happy to
avoid anyone with the last name Hofferson for as long as possible. He might be able to keep his feelings for Astrid hidden in front of the lady herself, but Cami was as silver-tongued as she was quick-fingered, and she could spot liars in a heartbeat. If she asked anything about it, Hiccup was positive that she would suss him out in a second.

He could feel her looming behind him, watching him like a hawk.

"What do you want?" he grunted, his fingers curling tight around his stylus.

She through her arms up in the air and slapped them on her legs. "Are you really not going to tell me anything about this weekend?"

“Nothing happened.”

Cami’s feet slammed onto the floor, and in one fluid motion she slid her chair over next to Hiccup’s, resting her elbow on his desk and raising her eyebrows. “Oh, I bet nothing happened.”

Hiccup tried to keep his gaze fixed on his computer screen, but his eyes unwillingly flickered over towards her, just in time to see her wiggling her eyebrows up and down, her eyes shining, and he threw back his head and groaned.

“Astrid and I kissed.”

Cami’s eyes bugged. “Are you serious?”

He nodded.

She fist pumped, and her head rolled back into the chair, her eyes raised to the heavens as she let out a breathy: “yessss,” her hands clutched to her chest. “I’ve been waiting so long for this. I feel like I just got kissed myself.”

“Wait, you’ve been waiting for this?”

She wasn’t listening, too busy spinning herself around and around in her chair, her legs high up off the floor. “I’ve ascended into a higher plane of being. This is it. I’ve achieved everything I ever wanted.”

“Cami, you’ve been waiting for this?”

“Honestly, Hiccup, this feeling is better than sex.”

“…Me kissing your cousin is better than sex?”

Cami sighed and slung her head back in her seat. “I’m in a romantic dry spell right now, and my two best friends have finally got together, give me this at least.”

Hiccup sighed. “We’re not together.”

Cami slammed her feet on the floor again, and stared right at Hiccup, her chair stopping abruptly. “What?”

“We’re not together.”

“No, wait, maybe I heard it wrong,” Cami said, lifting her fingers in the air and motioning as if to rewind the conversation. “You took my cousin on a date, you both got all dressed up, she met your parents, you two kissed, and somehow you’re not together by the end of it?”
“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

“You’re not telling me the full story.”

Hiccup sighed again and spun around in his chair, turning back to look at his computer screen. “It’s… complicated.”

“Didn’t say I was going anywhere.”

Hiccup looked back at her. She was sat in her chair, arms folded, her gaze steely. “Look, Hiccup,” she said, her voice just a little sharper than before. “I know whatever’s gone down has made you kind of uncomfortable and I don’t mean to make it worse, and it’s not that I don’t totally trust you, but if you’ve done something to hurt my cousin -”

“No!” Hiccup said quickly, his legs pulling his chair over to hers, holding her own chair still. “I’d never - I wouldn’t - no. I haven’t hurt her. At least, I don’t think I have. It’s a long story.”

Her gaze softened, but it wasn’t any less persistent. “I told you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Hiccup sighed a third time. It was getting abundantly clear that he wasn’t going to get away with wheedling his way out of this conversation.

“Cameron? Could you come over here and help me with this please?”

He was saved by the curt words of one of their co-workers: one who’d Cami had once spilled coffee over and to whom she was still, months later, paying her dues to. Cami rolled her eyes and hopped out of her seat, delivering an overly bright, “on my way!” over her shoulder. She turned back to look at Hiccup before she left, leaning in close. “You and I aren’t done, Haddock. I’ll see you at lunch.”

Hiccup swung back in his chair and picked up his stylus, ready to finally start work. He didn’t feel much better though. As he’d expected, Cami had sussed him out and wasn’t going to let up until he relayed every gory detail of his weekend.

It was going to be a long day.

Hiccup had rather been hoping that as the day drew on, she might forget about their conversation and move on, but expecting Cami to keep her nose out of any kind of gossip was like expecting a fish not to swim, especially when involved two people she cared about. His only choice was to figure out a way of getting out without her noticing. When his lunch hour came, he tilted his head back, and saw her at her desk, tapping away at her keyboard, engrossed in whatever she was working on. As silently as he could, keeping his eyes fixed on her, he slunk out of his chair and crept towards the door, ready to make his escape.

“You didn’t think I’d just let you leave, did you?”

Hiccup jumped and had to hold in a high-pitched scream, stepping back to see Cami propped up against the door, leaning lazily on the frame, a triumphant smirk on her face.

Hiccup turned over his shoulder to see Cami’s desk empty. “How did you…?”

“C’mon,” Cami said, linking her arms through his. “Let’s go get lunch.”
She dragged him out of the building and Hiccup sighed, resigning himself to being pulled along by Cami as they made their way to the cafe they both liked to frequent. It had taken them a long time to find their favourite: it ended up being a small place on the edge of a side street, somewhere with excellent food and far away from anywhere any of their other co-workers might go.

In the cafe, they sat at their usual table: a small one by the window. The two of them were fond of being able to look outside while they ate - Hiccup because he liked getting distracted, and Cami because she liked being able to make fun of passers-by. Today though, neither of them looked out the window: Cami was far too focused on getting Hiccup to spill his story. He insisted they order food first, and in true Hofferson fashion, Cami rolled her eyes and kicked off her shoes, tucking her legs underneath her while they waited for sandwiches and coffee.

At first, he was reluctant, but the more he spoke, the more he found that there was something cathartic about getting all of his feelings out in the open. He’d spent the whole weekend stuck in his own head, completely unable to tell his best friend all the things that were happening in there, and now that he’d started to speak, he found he couldn’t stop – and the more he talked, the more Cami was enthralled; at the beginning, she’d been half eating, half listening, but by the end, she’d pushed her plate to the side, listening whole-heartedly.

By the time Hiccup had finished, Cami was collapsed in her seat, rubbing a hand across her forehead. “I don’t get it,” she said, finally, after a few moments of silence. “If you like her so much, why didn’t you just ask her out in the first place?”

“I didn’t know I liked her then,” Hiccup said mournfully, pouting as he slumped in his seat.

Cami groaned, her hands covering her face as she muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “I’m too gay for this,” before leaning forward in her seat. “This is some middle school level bullshit.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

Hiccup, look,” Cami said, her voice softening a little. “I know I’m not exactly the poster child for mature relationships, but if you want to sort this out, you gotta talk to her.”

Hiccup swallowed, his hands tensing up on his lap. “I can’t,” he mumbled, his mouth dry. “What if I ruin our friendship?”

“Oh my God.” Cami let out an exasperated sigh. “Straight people.”

Despite himself, Hiccup snorted.

“So what if it ruins your friendship? What if there’s a chance that you guys could have something really good together?”

Hiccup sighed. “You should have seen her face, Cami,” he said. “It was like the very idea of spending another month pretending to date me was repulsive.”

“Well, she still agreed to do it, didn’t she?”

Hiccup pulled his legs up onto the chair, hiding his frown behind his mug. “She’s only doing it because she feels guilty. Mum said something to her about how ‘lonely’ I am, and now she feels bad. Trust me, if she didn’t, she wouldn’t be doing this.”
Cami frowned, her eyebrows knotting together. “Are you sure? That doesn’t sound like Astrid…”

“I’m sure,” Hiccup said, his voice firm. “Astrid doesn’t feel the same way about me. Not in a million years.”

“Then, I don’t know what to tell you, Hiccup,” she said, shaking her head as she brought her coffee back up to her mouth. “Just that… if you’re really going to go through with this, try not to do anything too stupid. No offense, but you’ve kind of make it a habit.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” he muttered.

Hiccup had a feeling that it was going to be a very long month.
A Speech About Love

Chapter by untakenbeepun, wilderwestqueen (untakenbeepun)

“You’re going to get cramp in your hand.”

Hiccup’s heart jumped out of his chest and his shoulders tensed up to his ears, his arms flailing madly, knocking off his headphones as he did so. They toppled onto the floor, dragging the keyboard and tablet down with them, landing in a tangled heap on the carpet. “How did you get in?!”

He’d been working solidly for most of the day, his hand cramping over his graphics tablet and his headphones thumping loud music. After he’d asked his boss for the time off, he’d received the stink-eye and was sharply told that he better get all of his work for the month done before he left, so all of Hiccup’s free time was consumed by sitting in front of the computer and trying to finish off as much as he possibly could. He had to rush through as many as possible to justify the two weeks off.

“Door was unlocked,” Astrid said cheerfully, bending down to help Hiccup gather everything that had fallen and put it back on the desk.

Hiccup leaned back in his chair and groaned, rubbing his eyes. “What time is it?”

“About ten. Have you moved at all today?”

“Ten?” Hiccup muttered, twisting around to look at the clock. “Are you sure?”

She was right. He’d been hunched over his computer for about five hours, and all at once he realised how much his body was crying out for a break. He extracted himself from the chair that had become his prison, and joined Astrid on the sofa, where she’d made herself comfortable.

“Seeing as you haven’t eaten,” she said with a stern glare, opening up a bag she’d brought with her, pulling out various snacks, “I brought you some stuff.”

Hiccup dived into the bag, pulled out a chocolate bar, ripping off the wrapper and taking a huge bite, before closing his eyes and letting out a long, satisfied groan. “You’re the best person in the world.”

“So I’ve heard.”

He finished the chocolate, licking each of his fingers in turn, and then raised his eyebrows. “How did you know I hadn’t eaten?”

Astrid tipped her head to the side. “So, funny story,” she said, her voice taking a sharper tone

“Oh no,” Hiccup muttered.

“Your mother sent me a text. Well, five texts, actually.”

He froze, his fingers still hovering in front of his face. “What?”

“Oh yeah,” Astrid said, with a faux cheery voice and a dangerous smile. She held up her phone, revealing a stream of texts from his mother’s mobile number. “Hiccup isn’t answering his phone, is he with you? You couldn’t just go and check if he’s alright, could you?”
Hiccup groaned, and wiped a hand down his face.

She kept scrolling through her phone. “I worry about him. Can you make sure he eats?” She pulled his hand away from his face, making him look her in the eye. “How did she even get my number, Hiccup?!”

“I don’t know!” Hiccup said, frantically pulling his hand away from her and shifting as far back on the sofa as he could. “I didn’t give it to her! My parents have a way finding these things out! They’re scary like that!”

“Hiccup.”

“What?”

She whacked him with a cushion. “Call your mother back!”

Hiccup sighed, and for the first time that day, he picked up his phone. After he’d got through another conversation of his mother telling him that he was taking on too much work, and asking him how Astrid was and – “You are remembering to eat, aren’t you, dear?” – he turned back to see Astrid stretched out on his sofa, breaking squares off a chocolate bar, tossing them in the air and catching them in her mouth.

Hiccup moved Astrid’s legs out of the way and dropped onto the sofa, earning himself an indignant kick. He scowled, mock offended, before the clock across his room caught his attention. “Don’t you have work right now?”

She pursed her lips and moved her legs right back over his lap, taking another bite of chocolate. “Moved my shifts around.”

Astrid’s feet brushed against his legs, and a familiar feeling pricked across his skin. Hiccup was beginning to get used to the way Astrid’s touch made his stomach twist, or at least, as used to it as one could be. It was still a surprising jolt to the system, but he wasn’t having anymore crises about the nature of his feelings anymore. Hiccup had a silly little crush on his best friend, and he’d resigned himself to the fact that he was just going to have to deal with it until these annoying feelings went on their merry way.

“You wanna talk wedding?” Hiccup said.

Since the reunion, Astrid had been making him discuss strategy with her again. She’d told him sharply that two weeks was a much bigger deal than a day, and that their previous preparations were not sufficient. Hiccup didn’t care. He was just happy to spend time with her.

There was a glaring hole in their plans, a little detail that they’d both conveniently avoided mentioning, but no matter how hard he tried, Hiccup couldn’t bring himself to bring up the kiss. Astrid hadn’t spoken about it either, so he assumed that she was pretending that it had never happened. The thought hurt Hiccup a little, but he pushed it out of his mind. He wasn’t going to bring it up until she did, not if it was going to make her uncomfortable. They’d cross that bridge when they got to it. If they got to it.

“I don’t know what more we could possibly do to make us look like a believable couple,” Astrid said, somewhat flippant, poking him with her toe. “Your mother seems pretty convinced, seeing as she’s decided that I’m the person to call when you’re not answering your phone.”

“I’m sorry!” Hiccup whined. “I had no idea she’d do that.”
Astrid grinned, content for a moment to just sit in silence with her feet in Hiccup’s lap. “So,” she said, after a while. “Catching the plane at the weekend. You ready to do this again?”

*Much more than you’ll ever know.*

“Is anyone ever ready to date you?”

“Ha.” She threw a cushion at him.

Hiccup wrapped his arms around it. “It’ll be for much longer this time. We can still call this off if you want.”

He felt like he’d asked that question a million times in the past two weeks.

With the lack of cushion to throw at him, she hit him gently on the arm. “I told you I was doing it, okay?”

“I know, I know. Just making sure you’re not having cold feet,” Hiccup said.

“Sounds to me like you’re the one with cold feet,” Astrid said, as she began rifling through the bag, pulling out a packet of sweets. “It’s gonna be fine, Hiccup. Don’t worry so much about it.”

He longed to tell her what was really making him nervous. He wished in that moment that he could tell her that it wasn’t that he had cold feet, not at all, in fact, the opposite. There was nothing that Hiccup wanted more than to bring Astrid back to his hometown, to show her where he’d grown up, to bring her to his parents wedding, to spend two whole weeks with her. He just ached for it to be real.

But he couldn’t tell her that, so instead, he sat still, content to watch as she popped sweet after sweet into her mouth.

No matter how much he tried, being invited home by his father always felt like a summons to his execution.

Hiccup sat primly on the edge of his seat, tapping his fingers on his knees, unable to stop the slight quiver in his legs.

But weirdly, Stoick seemed just as nervous as he was, rubbing his hands together as he sat down in the chair opposite Hiccup and pushed a glass of squash towards him.

"Alright, son, I’ll get right to it," Stoick said, as Hiccup picked up the glass and took a sip. "Val and I were talking, and we were wondering if you would like to be the best man at our wedding."

Hiccup almost spat his drink back out into the glass. "Me?" he said, his voice a much higher pitch than usual. "Are you sure?"

Stoick slid back into his chair and blinked. "Of course you, Hiccup. Who else would we pick?"

Hiccup swallowed, too stunned to speak for a moment. "I just assumed it would be Gobber, y’know, he’s Mum's brother and your best friend, he's important to the two of you..." his voice trailed away.

"Val's chosen him to be the man of honour," Stoick explained. "We both really want you to be

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Stoick said, quickly. "If you'd rather just watch, that's fine too. But we'd really love for you to take that role. You're the best man for it."

He gave a small chuckle at his little joke, which faded away into an awkward silence.

"I'll do it," Hiccup said, as he saw Stoick's smile slip. "I'd be happy to."

Stoick's expression lifted, and he put on a fond smile. "Excellent, Val said you would be. What I really wanted to let you know about was the speech."

"Oh," Hiccup said. "You want me to give a speech about you and Mum?"

Stoick shrugged. "It doesn't have to strictly be about me and your mum. It can be about love."

"A speech about love," Hiccup said and swallowed, stroking his chin in an attempt look thoughtful, rather than panicked. “Okay. I can do that.”

On the inside, he was freaking out.

Love.

Love wasn’t on Hiccup’s radar. His romantic life had always been neither here nor there, a mismatched bunch of forgotten dates and unsatisfying hook-ups. Relationships hadn’t even been in his brain until the reunion, and even then, the thought brought a lump in his throat.

Love wasn’t something that happened to him.

A SPEECH ABOUT LOVE

Love is-

*When my father asked me to write this speech, I

*Mum and Dad have always been

*oh god i'm so screwed i'm so screwed why did i agree to this

Hiccup's eyes felt like they would fall out at any minute, he'd done them so much strain staring at his bright computer screen while sitting in complete darkness. His hands hovered over the keyboard, his fingers stretched into long tense lines, curled like claws over the keys. He stayed that way for a long few minutes, the cursor on screen blinking at him in mockery, before he let out a long, loud groan, and threw his arms across the keyboard, his head following suit. On screen, a long line of nonsensical letters spread across the word document.

This was impossible.

He'd been trying for lord knows how many hours to get something down onto the page: but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get anything that made sense, much less anything that he'd
actually deign to say out loud.

No matter what he did, he was going to make a fool of himself.

He'd tried to write the speech the way he'd always learned to write essays in high school: mash out a first draft, and then fix the mistakes later, but his head was empty, and the word document remained blank.

Hiccup's head was still on the keyboard, his hands curled up in his hair when he heard the mewing. He raised his head a little, spotting a pair of bright green eyes. With the side of his finger, he flicked on his lamp, and managed a smile when his face met Toothless'.

"Hey bud." He scratched the space between the cat's ears, earning himself a satisfied purr. "Have I been ignoring you?"

Toothless pushed his head against Hiccup's hand, which he took as a definitive 'yes'. It always amazed Hiccup how, somehow, this little cat seemed to understand human speech. Astrid had always called it a coincidence and Hiccup always had the same answer:

"He understands me, I know he does," he'd say.

Astrid always made some sort of scornful comment. Hiccup had decided she was just jealous that she couldn’t speak cat.

Hiccup snorted at the thought, before standing up out of his chair, for the first time that day realising how much his legs ached. When was the last time he'd moved? No wonder Toothless was demanding his attention.

"C'mon," Hiccup said. "Let's go get you some food."

He wandered towards the door, Toothless slipping off the desk with surprising grace and poise for a three-legged cat and followed his friend into the kitchen.

Hiccup cringed when he saw the empty bowl. "Sorry, bud," he muttered, as he filled it with food. "Just been distracted, I guess."

Toothless narrowed his eyes at him, but his disdain didn't last for long as he dug into the food bowl.

Hiccup’s kitchen was a miserable affair. It was square, the whole thing boxed in by off-white counters, with cupboard doors that were barely hanging onto their hinges. From the middle of the room, a light bulb dangled; it had no lampshade, because he’d never bothered to buy one. The apartment was never going to feel like home, Hiccup reasoned, he wasn’t going to stay there forever, so why should he pretend to make it nice?

It had never bothered him before, but after the weekend he’d had in his parents’ home, where everything was made up to perfection, Hiccup was starting to regret never having made his apartment a home. While he perched on a stool and waited for Toothless to finish eating, Hiccup resolved to get a lampshade.

He was pulled out of his reverie by the sound of his phone buzzing across the kitchen counter top, and upon checking the caller ID, a smile spread across his face.

“Fishlegs!” he said, brightly. “I haven’t heard from you in forever!”

“Yeah, no kidding,” came his old friend’s sarcastic tone. “You move off to the mainland and fall
off the face of the Earth, it seems. I swear, everyone left for the day, and this place was silent. It was unnerving. I almost missed everyone. Almost.”

Hiccup grinned. “I missed you at the reunion! I had to deal with Snotlout all on my own!”

There was a snort from the other end of the phone. “On your own, my foot,” Fishlegs said. “Everyone was talking about the ‘little lady friend’ you brought to the reunion. I was just calling to see if it was true.”

Hiccup frowned as he considered what he should say next. He didn’t want to lie to one of his oldest friends, but it also wouldn’t be good to let the secret out: not to someone in the thick of it all.

“It’s true,” Hiccup said, his voice dry.

Fishlegs gave a loud squeak, a happy sound. “No way?! Now I’m sad I didn’t make the trip. What’s she like?”

“Astrid?” Hiccup said, and then paused, his eyes closing as he said the first thing that came into his mind. “She’s… amazing. Probably the prettiest girl I’ve ever met in my life, and one of the funniest. She teases me to know end, and it should drive me mad, but somehow it just makes me like her even more. She always has the best advice for me: she knows how to keep me on track. And… everything’s so easy, with her, y’know? Like, I don’t even have to try to get her to like me, or to laugh my jokes, or to treat me decently. She just does.”

Fishlegs made a noise on the other end of the phone, a strange noise that ended with a long “awwww!” He giggled before speaking again. “When am I going to meet her?” he said, and Hiccup could almost see his friend wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Sooner than you think,” Hiccup said. “She’s coming to the wedding.”

“Yes!” Fishlegs said, and Hiccup smiled as he imagined his friend fist-pumping. “Can't wait to see you, Hiccup, it's been so long.”

"Can’t wait to see you either,” Hiccup said, chewing on his bottom lip. “Sorry I’ve been a stranger.”

“You’re forgiven. Clearly you’ve been busy,” Fishlegs said, emphasising the word busy. “But seriously, Hiccup, it’s nice to hear you’ve found yourself someone. You sound so happy.”

Hiccup swallowed. “Yeah. I suppose I am.”

They talked for a little longer before they said their goodbyes and made promises to meet up in a few weeks, and after he ended the call, an uncomfortable silence filled the room again.

Hiccup sighed. He’d been present in the conversation, but his mind had kept wandering back to what he’d said about Astrid, the little speech he’d given rolling about in his mind.

It had all come straight from his heart, and the more he thought about it, the more he realised that not a single word had been a lie.

Hiccup's room was lit solely by the light of his alarm clock, the whole room bathed in the dim slightly blue light. His suitcase was open wide on the floor, a few clothes haphazardly thrown in
for good measure. Toothless was curled up inside, and the last time Hiccup had tried to pick him up, he'd hissed at him and steadfastly refused to move.

Not that it mattered. Hiccup was hopeless at packing.

He’d given up long ago, and was now lying on his bed and staring up at the ceiling, thinking of the day to come. Tomorrow, Astrid would be by his side again, in his personal space, filling up all of his thoughts with her. Not that they weren’t already. He’d found her creeping into his head at the most annoying of times. Something told him that no matter what he did, Astrid would invade his thoughts now. Stupid crush.

The thoughts of the next day tugged on his mind and he lifted his head and looked at the empty suitcase. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t bring himself to focus. He’d tried making a list of things he needed, but he’d ended up doodling in the margins of the page. He checked the clock. 10pm.

He’d been sitting in front of his laptop all day, his speech open on a word document, but he had nothing to show for it. Hiccup had been trying and trying all day to get something written down, but no matter how hard he tried, no words came. He’d switched to a notepad and a pencil, and that hadn’t worked either. He just ended up doodling in the margins.

With a sigh, he reached into his pocket for his phone and called the one person that he really wanted to talk to.

"Are you still at work?" Hiccup said, in lieu of a hello.

The voice on the other side gave a long exasperated sigh. "I’m not your girlfriend until tomorrow, Haddock."

"I need help. Help only you can help me with."

"What kind of help?" Her voice on the other side of the line crackled.

"Packing."

"Call your mother."

Hiccup groaned. "Please."

“No.”

“I’ll pay you in food.”

“You don’t have any food.”

“Pleeееееase.”

"Yeah, yeah, I’m already on my way, you asshole."

She arrived at his door ten minutes later, letting herself in as she always did.

"In the bedroom!" Hiccup called after she'd shouted asking where he was.

"Well, this is a pathetic sight."

Hiccup hadn't moved since the phone call, he'd stayed right where he was, staring straight up at the ceiling. Astrid flicked on the light and Hiccup hissed, covering his eyes with his hands.
"If you think I'm doing it for you, you've got another thing coming," Astrid said, standing over his bed, her hands on her hips.

"I tried. Toothless wouldn't let me," Hiccup muttered, gesturing over towards where his cat was curled up.

Astrid rolled her eyes. "That's easily rectified," she said, marching over to the suitcase, picking Toothless up and moving him out of the way. "Problem solved."

"He didn't let me do that!"

"That's because he likes me better."

Hiccup scowled, sitting up and reaching down for the cat. "That's not true, right, bud?"

The cat slipped from Hiccup's grasp and went to purr at Astrid's feet, rubbing his body against her legs. Astrid grinned, triumphant.

"Traitor," Hiccup said with a pout. "These two weeks aren't going to be fun if you're always taking her side."

Astrid blinked. "You're taking him with us?"

Hiccup stared at her like she'd just said the most obvious thing in the world. "Yeah?"

"We're only going to be gone for two weeks. Find someone to look after him."

"I don't trust anyone to do it properly."

"You know what, I don’t know why I thought it’d be any different," Astrid muttered, throwing her hands in the air in defeat.

“It’s too late to find anywhere for him anyway,” Hiccup said smugly, and all at once Astrid realised that had been his plan the whole time.

Astrid rolled her eyes and dropped down onto Hiccup’s bed, sliding her phone out of her pocket and propping up her legs on the wall. “So, anyway, I can’t wait to tell your mother that the real reason why you’ve never brought a girl home before is that you’re too devoted to your cat.”

Hiccup scowled again. “I’m devoted to him just the right amount, thanks.”

“Are you packing or not?”

Astrid refused to do any of the packing for him, instead sitting on his bed and ordering him about, occasionally stopping to criticise his packing skills – “Who taught you how to fold clothes, Haddock?”

Once he was done, he collapsed onto the bed next to her, pulling his pillow over his face, giving another groan.

“Alright,” Astrid sighed, prodding at him. “Are you gonna tell me what’s got you like this or not?”

“I just really, really hate packing.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “What’s the real reason?”
Hiccup sighed and pulled himself up to sit cross legged next to her, picking at the threads on his duvet cover. “I’m just not looking forward to two weeks in close proximity to my parents.”

It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either.

“You’re parents aren’t that bad, Hiccup,” Astrid said. “They’re actually really nice.”

“You didn’t have to grow up with them, you don’t know what they’re really like.”

“If you say so,” she said, looking back down at her phone again.

He couldn’t very well tell her that she was his problem – that the fact that they would be spending the next two weeks in each other’s space had made him both the most excited and the most terrified that he had ever been. He couldn’t tell her that the idea that they’d be touching all the time again sent his thoughts into a frenzy. He couldn’t tell her that the brush of her skin on his made his heart speed up and goose bumps prickle all over his arms.

He wouldn’t even know how to word it.

“Dad asked me to be the best man,” he said, after a long silence.

Astrid’s eyes flickered up from her phone. “That’s great,” she said. Then she looked at his face. “That’s great, right, Hiccup?”

“Yeah,” Hiccup said, still fiddling with the threads in the duvet cover. “But he wants me to make this speech.”

“Oh.”

“A speech about love,” Hiccup said, staring down at his fingers.

“And?”

“And I don’t know anything about love.”

Astrid sighed, switching off her phone and sliding it into her pocket. She crossed her legs onto the bed and rested her hands on her knees. “What makes you think you don’t know anything?”

“Well, I’ve never been in love, for one,” Hiccup said.

For some reason, he wasn’t able to look at her while he said that.

“Does it matter?” Astrid said. “You’re thinking about this the wrong way.”

“Oh, I am?”

“Yeah,” Astrid said. “There’s more than one kind of love. You don’t just have to talk about the romantic kind.”

Hiccup sighed. “It’s at a wedding though. Romantic is what they’re expecting.”

“Does it really matter if you take a different angle?”

He slumped his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

She rolled her eyes, flicking him on the nose. “You’ve still got ages to figure it out,” she said, pulling herself up and off the bed. “Anyway, I gotta go.”
“Already?”

“It’s almost midnight, and we have to be up at 6,” Astrid said.

Hiccup pouted. “We used to do that every day at university.”

An amused smile peaked at the edge of Astrid’s lips, while she packed up her stuff and slung her bag over her shoulder. “Goodbye, Hiccup,” she said, before she swept out of the room.

He felt her absence almost immediately.
She was sitting atop her suitcase, her legs astride the edge, hands on the handle, and for the what felt like the hundredth time, Hiccup felt his heart stop in his chest. She was looking at him with a quirked smile, bright eyes and a face that was far too awake and fresh for six o’clock in the morning.

“You’re late,” she said.

Hiccup scowled at her, his eyelids at half-mast. “I don’t understand how you’re awake.”

“Sheer will-power,” she said, “and lots, and lots of coffee. Speaking of-” she reached down beside her, pulling up a paper Starbucks cup, and holding it out to him.

“You’re an angel, and I could kiss you right now.”

Astrid grinned. “Save it for your parents.”

Hiccup was snoring.

Despite the full cup of coffee he’d chugged that morning, he was sound asleep in his chair. After they’d checked in, been felt up in security, and discovered that – of course – their flight was delayed, they’d sat down and Hiccup had promptly fallen fast asleep. Then he’d started snoring. Not small snores either, not tiny little hamster snores, no, big snores, Darth-Vader-with-a-head-cold snores, his head slung back, his mouth wide open, and drool dribbling down his chin. People were starting to look.

Astrid sunk down in her seat, covering her face with her hand. The more I’m-not-with-him vibes she could give off, the better.

It didn’t work. People were glaring at her, as if it was her fault.

“Oi, Hiccup,” she muttered.

No response.

She poked him a few times, shook his shoulder, blew in his ear: all to no avail. Finally, as a last resort, she opened up her water bottle and tipped the contents over his face.

Hiccup’s eyes snapped open, spluttering what back up. “Wha-” he said, his face priceless, half way between shocked and utterly confused. Astrid doubled over, clutching her stomach and laughing.

He wiped his face off with his sleeve. “What was that for?”

“You were snoring,” Astrid said, still giggling, “and people were starting to stare.”

“Could’ve just shook me.”

“I tried,” she said. “You sleep like the dead. Is it really that hard for you to get up at six?”

Hiccup frowned. “ Didn’t sleep very well.”
Hiccup frowned. "Didn’t sleep very well."

"Didn’t sleep at all, more like. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get his mind to shut off, and he’d spent most of the night, rolling over, twisting this way and that in his sheets, until finally he’d given up. At about three o’clock in the morning, he got out of bed, and sat on his kitchen counter, eating peanut butter out of the jar and letting Toothless lick the spoon.

He’d been thinking – endlessly – about the month or so to come. Four times during the night he’d had to stop himself from picking up the phone and telling Astrid it was a mistake. He was getting anxiety in ways he had not had in a long time: the feeling that someone was taking a wooden spoon to his stomach and stirring his insides up.

Astrid’s smile faded, her head tilted, eyes filling with concern. "Is everything okay?"

"It’s fine," Hiccup said, quickly. "Just got myself into a bad sleeping pattern, that’s all. It’ll fix itself."

She narrowed her eyes as if she didn’t believe him, but nodded anyway. "Plenty of time to sleep on the plane."

"Jesus, Hiccup, I knew your parents were, like, minor celebrities, but this is just excessive."

Maybe he should have prepared her for this. Hiccup hadn’t taken a flight in years, and he’d forgotten that there was only one way his parents liked to travel: in the upmost comfort and style. Astrid had followed Hiccup into in the cabin and taken one look at the plush, leather seats with miles of leg room, the big televisions, and the food trolleys full of expensive looking things, and her eyes had bugged out.

I’ve never flown like this before," she said, her jaw dropping. "I’ve always ended up in cramped cabins sitting next to a crying baby."

She flung herself into her seat, her legs splayed out in front of her. "So much space!"

"My parents like to travel a certain way."

"Y’know, Hiccup," Astrid said, popping a complimentary sweet into her mouth, "If these are the perks of dating you, maybe I’ll do it for real."

Hiccup coughed. "Ha," he said. "Yeah."

She didn’t seem to notice the change in his expression, giggling as she fell back in her seat. "I feel like a movie star!"

She paused, a flash of inspiration flying across her face. Then, she bent down and began scrabbling through her hand luggage, pulling out a pair of large sunglasses, covering her face with them.

"No, no, no, George this simply won’t do. I ordered my own private jet and I expect nothing less," she said, her voice in an over the top posh falsetto.

Hiccup doubled over, his shoulders shaking as he laughed. "And I expect the finest bottle of wine and your best caviar," she said.

"We can certainly do that for you, Miss Hofferson."
The air hostess had appeared at their sides, an amused smile on her face. Astrid spluttered and knocked the sunglasses off, while Hiccup had to press his hand over his face to stop himself from laughing too loudly.

"Fasten your seatbelts, stay upright until take off, please read the safety booklet and look into the aisle for a demonstration of what to do in an emergency," she said, finding it hard to keep the smile down.

The two of them nodded, neither finding themselves able to speak. She turned to go, and as she disappeared down the aisle, they heard her break into laughter.

Hiccup let his hand go and burst into laughter himself, wiping tears from his eyes. Astrid smacked him.

Soon enough they were ready for take-off, the plane speeding along the run way. Hiccup frowned then, bending down and sticking a finger through the mesh of the pet carrier at his feet.

Astrid leaned over. "Is he okay?" she asked.

"He'll be alright," Hiccup said. "He's just not used to this kind of thing."

Getting Toothless into the pet carrier had been hell. The little thing was stubborn, and Hiccup had found over the years that trying to get him to do anything he didn't want to do involved moving mountains and crossing seas. Trying to put him in the carrier had resulted in hissing and scratch marks on Hiccup's fingers. He'd tried begging - he was sure that his cat could understand human speech - but that had ended with Toothless narrowing his eyes and peeing in Hiccup's hat. His last resort had been to put some of Toothless' favourite treats inside and gently coaxing him inside.

Bribery was the only way to train a cat, apparently.

The look of sadness and betrayal on Toothless' face had almost been enough to make Hiccup set him free.

"You know, it would have been simpler just to find someone to look after him," Astrid said, seeing the look on his face.

"I didn't want to leave him behind," Hiccup mumbled.

Astrid rolled her eyes, but she couldn't keep the fond smile from her face.

The flight wasn't long – the isle of Berk wasn’t too far off the coast – but it was a bumpy one. Flights to such a small island were few and far between, and usually only with very small airlines. First class catered to a lot of things; but it couldn’t stop the turbulence.

Hiccup had been so preoccupied with Toothless, making sure the little cat was safe in his carrier – he was, but if the yowling was anything to go by, he wasn’t very happy – he hadn’t noticed Astrid turn a shade of white, her fingers gripping around the armrest.

It wasn’t until her leg started drumming up and down that he started to take note.

"Astrid," Hiccup said, his eyes flickering up in concern, "you okay?"

"Just fine," Astrid said. Her voice was tight.

"I thought you were okay with flying."
“When it’s smooth.” She swallowed. “Not so great when it’s bumpy.”

“Look at me.”

Hiccup put his hand over Astrid’s. She turned and looked at him, big blue eyes filled with fear.

“We’re going to be just fine,” he said, “I promise you. I’ve done this before. Take a few deep breaths.”

She did so. Hiccup smiled.

“That’s good,” he said, his voice full of encouragement. “We’re going to get through this. When we land, we’ll be laughing about it.”

Astrid nodded. Then, she turned her palm upwards, linking her fingers with Hiccup.

They stayed that way until the plane landed.

When they had touched down on the isle of Berk, Stoick and Val were waiting for them, wide smiles on their faces. They were dressed casually, just in shirts and jeans, and something about that made both Astrid and Hiccup feel more comfortable.

"Astrid!” Val said, opening her arms out towards the girl. "I'm so glad you decided to join us, it's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Mrs Hadd- uh, Val," Astrid said, correcting herself with a smile. "So have the two of you met the real love of Hiccup's life?"

Behind her Hiccup groaned, while Stoick and Val blinked in confusion.

Hiccup lifted up the pet carrier and the two bent over it to take a peek at Toothless.

"Oh, isn't he sweet?" Val said, putting her fingers through the wires to scratch the cat's head.

"You brought the cat with you?" Stoick said gruffly, but he too went to look inside, a small smile on his face.

Hiccup scratched the back of his head and shrugged. "He didn't want to miss all the fun. I couldn't leave him behind."

"I think he likes the cat more than me," Astrid said. "He never wants to go anywhere without him."

Her hand had wrapped around his waist and Hiccup felt himself still. He'd forgotten, again, that they were faking it, and with Astrid's touch he'd felt shivers up his spine. His mouth went dry, and he took a deep breath in. God, how was he going to get through two weeks?

They piled into his parents' car, Astrid and Hiccup squeezed into the back with Toothless tucked at Hiccup's feet. Astrid's hand was in his, her slender fingers curling around his. His heart had sped up considerably, and he found himself unable to look at her, so he stared straight out the window.

Hiccup wondered if she could tell.

"So how have you been the past two weeks?" Val said, twisting in the front seat to look back at
them. "Honestly, it's been impossible to get you on your phone, Hiccup, how am I supposed to know if you're looking after yourself properly?"

"I had to get all of this work done for them to let me take these next two weeks off," Hiccup muttered.

Val looked a little guilty at that.

"Don't worry, Val, I make sure he eats," Astrid said, her tone bright. She never sounded like that when she was making sure he ate. She normally groaned and rolled her eyes like he was the biggest nuisance in the world. "I think he'd forget otherwise. I don't know what he'd do without me."

Hiccup's reply slipped out so easily, he forgot that it wasn't supposed to be sincere. "Neither do I."

In the front seat, Val cooed quietly, and she and Stoick shared a look. Astrid was staring at him, her blue eyes alight in the darkness of the car, her expression unreadable. When Hiccup looked back at her, she smiled.

"You'd cringe at the diet he had in university," Astrid said, addressing Val. "I'm not sure he ever ate even one proper meal."

"Don't tell her that," Hiccup said, his voice slightly strained. "She'll make me move back home so that she can feed me properly."

Val laughed. "Don't worry, I wouldn't dream of separating the two of you," she said. Then her voice turned sterner. "But I will be insisting on family meals more than once a month, young man. If I can get at least one nutritious meal into you a week, I'll consider myself a successful mother. You're welcome to come too, Astrid."

"I'd love to," Astrid said politely, but she and Hiccup shared a look.

They both knew it wasn't going to happen. After these two weeks were over, they would stop their little facade and Hiccup's parents probably wouldn't see Astrid again.

Not for the first time, the thought made Hiccup's chest constrict, but he pushed the thought out of his brain.

"Now, you must see as much of the island as possible on your stay," Val said, changing the topic. "It's such a beautiful place, you're going to love it, Astrid."

"Why did you move away?" Astrid asked, not impolitely.

"It was time for a change," Val said. "Stoick's business was picking up - it was hard to manage from a small island. It was better for work. I'd love to move back here, sometime."

"When we're retired, my dear," Stoick said, putting a free hand on Val's knee.

The two shared a soft smile, Val's hands brushing Stoick's before he had to put them back on the wheel.

"Make sure you get Hiccup to take you to the beach, Astrid," Val said. "It's really beautiful at this time of the year."

Astrid couldn't help but think that Val was right. She'd been looking out of the window as they drove along, and all she could see was lush green grass, wildflowers and, in the distance, the blue
of the sea, sparkling in the sunlight.

"I can't believe you grew up here," Astrid said, still staring out the window wide-eyed. "It's amazing."

Hiccup scratched the back of his head and smiled. He hadn't been back here since he had left for university, and something in his heart had swelled upon coming back. His memories were filled with his parents and their exploits and achievements - most of what he could remember of childhood was not being able to live up to Stoick and Val's example and expectations. He'd actually forgotten how much of a nice place it was. Now he was here, his stomach twisted, a little voice in his head telling him that he hadn't appreciated the Isle of Berk for what it was. Some people would jump at the chance to live here, and he hadn't been able to get away fast enough. He was starting to think that maybe the eagerness to get away had been a mistake.

"Wait until you see the house, Hiccup," Val said. "I've been talking to Gobber, and he assures me that he hasn't done anything to it, it's the same as it always was. Your room will be exactly how you left it."

Astrid's eyes lit up at that. "I get to see what childhood Hiccup's room was like?" she said, gleefully clapping her hands together. "Excellent!"

Val laughed, while Hiccup groaned.

"You don't know what you've done, Mum," he said. "She'll be searching for the embarrassing photos before we've even unpacked."

"Oh, I have plenty of those," Val said, a grin spreading across her face. "I'll get Stoick to distract him, and I'll show you them, Astrid, don't you worry."

There was a glint in Astrid's eye. "I look forward to it, Val."

In the backseat, Hiccup's hands were pressed into his face while he let out a long groan and muttered something that sounded like "Noooooo."

"There are all sorts of things in the house I could show you," Val said, and Hiccup found it remarkable how she and Astrid had the same scheming grins. "He can't keep everything hidden."

"Okay!" Hiccup said loudly, throwing his arms in the air. "I didn't bring Astrid here so that you could tell her all my secrets!"

Astrid and Val both laughed, and it was the same laugh - the two of them with their heads tipped back and their eyes squeezed shut.

"Have many secrets, do you?" Astrid said, once her giggles subsided.

"I don't need you to have more blackmail material than you already do."

Eventually, the winding roads became more familiar, until they were driving through the town Hiccup grew up in, and, eventually, arrived back at his childhood house, parking in the empty parking space.

"This isn't what I expected," Astrid mumbled in Hiccup's ear, low enough for Hiccup's parents not to hear.

"What did you expect?"
"I wasn't expecting it to be so normal," she said.

Hiccup's childhood home was much smaller than the mansion his parents lived in now. It was still fairly large, a red brick haven with a white window sills and a blue door - but it was much more average than Astrid had been expecting. Compared to the large marble arches and floors of the house she'd visited at the reunion, this was much more comfortable.

"I didn't realise how much I've missed this place," Hiccup whispered.

Astrid squeezed his hand.

Hiccup felt the tension leak out of his shoulders as he entered the house. Unlike his parents' mansion, this place held nothing but familiarity to him; it was comforting to be in a place that was a little old, a little rough around the edges, but still clean and lovely.

Somewhere he used to call home.

Astrid was still holding his hand and they kept holding onto each other as Stoick and Val ushered them inside.

"You must be hungry, the both of you, we'll order some food and have it in the living room, do make yourself comfortable..."

Astrid felt odd to be eating pizza out of the box in front of Hiccup's parents. Her only experience with them before had been very posh, very proper, to see Stoick and Val licking pizza sauce off their fingers just as Astrid and Hiccup did at home made her feel more at ease. Hiccup could feel her limbs relaxing as she sat next to him, their shoulders brushing.

He was not going to get used to this.

Astrid made conversation easy.

“So,” she said, after taking a bite of the pizza. “How are plans going for the wedding? You stressed?”

Val shared a knowing glance with Stoick. “Not especially.”

“Not at all?” Astrid said, licking her fingers.

“Well we’ve got a whole community to help us out,” Val said, with a smile. “Gobber said he wouldn’t let us lift a finger.”

“Wait, Gobber’s planning the wedding?” Hiccup said, a disbelieving grin tugging at his mouth. “Are you sure about that?”

“He’s actually surprisingly good it.”

“I can’t believe you’re cool with letting someone else handle it,” Astrid said. “When my Mum was getting married she went crazy with the plans. Wouldn’t let anyone else help.”

“Did it go okay?”

Astrid’s smile faltered, her hand hovering in the air, pizza still in hand. “Actually, uh, the wedding didn’t happen.”
Stoick and Val froze. Hiccup’s eyes flickered to Astrid before he looked back at his parents. “I thought you’d be planning it, Mum,” Hiccup said quickly, “isn’t that what you’re famous for, the Haddock parties?”

The comment alleviated the awkward air as Stoick and Val quickly fell back into the talking about all the parties they’d thrown over the years. Astrid smiled at Hiccup gratefully, leaning over and resting her head on Hiccup’s shoulder. Hiccup smiled back, and let his head rest atop hers, enjoying the contact.

Val’s eyes bugged when she saw them. “Oh my gosh,” she said, “here I am, just babbling away when you two must be so tired and I haven’t even shown you your room yet.”

“We’re fine, Mum,” Hiccup said quickly, not wanting to move away from the position he was in. It was too late. Astrid was already shifting up off his shoulder, and Hiccup frowned inwardly at the absence of her. “Besides, I know where my old room is.”

"Yes, but I'm sure you'll both want to unpack, and get some alone time," Val said, smiling at the two of them.

Hiccup frowned at the way she’d enunciated ‘alone time’

"That'll be great," Astrid said, wiping her fingers on a napkin and standing up. "Thank you for ordering food for us."

"It's my pleasure, dear!"

“I’ll get the bags from the car,” Astrid said, disappearing out onto the porch. Stoick followed her out to help her.

Hiccup made to follow them both, but Val grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back into the room. Her eyes flickered shiftily up towards the front door before sliding back to Hiccup.

“Just so you know,” she said, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper, “I put some you-know-whats in your bathroom.”

Hiccup’s brow furrowed. “You put what in my bathroom?”

“You know,” Val said, “condoms.”

Hiccup’s eyebrows shot up into the air, his mouth dropping. “Mum!”

“It’s important, Hiccup!”

“I’m not listening to this.”

“It’s a conversation we need to have!”

“I think it’s a conversation we never need to have.”

“Look, I’d love grandkids someday, Hiccup, but later would be preferable than sooner!” Val said.

Hiccup screwed his fingers in his ears. “La, la, la, la, la!”

“What’s going on here?”

Astrid had appeared in the doorway, suitcases by her side.
“Nothing,” Hiccup said quickly, dropping his fingers from his ears. “Just Mum ridding me of every shred of dignity I have.”

Val laughed, and ruffled Hiccup’s hair. Astrid raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“I’ll tell you later,” he muttered, low enough that only she could hear.

“Right,” Val said, clapping her hands together. “Have a good night’s sleep.”

Hiccup took Astrid’s hand and lead her up the stairs to his room. He peeked over his shoulder to see Stoick and Val standing together, offering him a thumbs-up. Stoick winked. Hiccup made a face. This was a mental picture that he was never going to be able to erase.

Luckily for him, it wasn’t a thought he could dwell on for long, because as he opened the door, the two of them realised a very big glaring problem that had slipped both of their minds.

In the middle of the room, there was a big double bed.

*One* big double bed.
"I'll sleep on the floor," Hiccup said quickly, hurrying towards the bed and fussing with the pillows, moving to arrange them on the floor into a makeshift bed. "I've heard it's good for you anyway, so-
"

He began frantically trying to make a comfortable space for himself on the floor.

"Hiccup, stop," Astrid said. She dropped the bags on the floor, and moved towards him, picking the pillows back up and throwing them back onto the bed. "It's ridiculous for you to sleep on the floor for two weeks. We can share a bed. It's fine."

Hiccup stilled. "Are you sure?" he began to gabble. "Because I can sleep on the floor, it's fine, I don't mind, I can't believe we didn't think of this, I'm sorry-"

"Hiccup," Astrid said, a little louder this time. "We can sleep in the same bed. The world won't implode."

Hiccup closed his mouth, his heart beating hard in his chest. He couldn't do this.

It was one thing to casually hold Astrid's hand, or have his arm around her waist, or kiss her on the cheek, but the idea of being that close to her all night was doing funny things to his stomach.

"Are you sure?" he repeated, his face like a rabbit in the headlights.

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm sure," she said, scrabbling through one of the suitcases to find her washbag and taking it over to Hiccup's en-suite, arranging her things on the empty shelf above the sink. Then she poked her head around the door, with an afterthought. "Just don't get any genius ideas, yes?" she said, sharply.

Hiccup turned bright red and spluttered, his hands covering his face. "No- I wouldn't- You know - We don't-"

Astrid came back into the room and cackled. "I was just kidding Hiccup, calm down."

She dropped herself onto the bed and stretched herself out, staring up at the ceiling. Hiccup hovered between the door and the bed, but after an internal war with himself, he joined her on the bed and stared up with her.

There were a set of stickers shaped like stars stuck up on the ceiling, all of them arranged into different shapes, peeling in the corners with age.

Astrid pointed at them. "Are those all in actual constellations?"

"Yeah," Hiccup said, pleased to finally have his voice back after the incident earlier. "I did it all one day in the summer when it was raining, and I thought it'd be cool to have the night sky on my ceiling. It took me ages to look up the exact constellations."

"Nerd," she said, playfully nudging him in the shoulder.

Hiccup grinned. "They glow in the dark."
"I bet that impressed all the girls you brought back here."

"Yeah," Hiccup coughed. "All the girls that I brought back here. The girls I brought here. This is the room where I brought all the girls."

Astrid sniggered.

"What, did you have guys falling at your feet in high school?" Hiccup muttered, folding his arms indignantly.

"Yes, actually," Astrid said, with a smug grin. "I was very popular."

"I guess with your looks I wouldn't blame you."

Hiccup froze.

It had just slipped out so easily.

They weren't in front of anybody right now. His parents were downstairs, out of the way - there was no way that they could hear their conversation. This wasn't the reunion anymore, there weren't people at every corner ready to sneak up on them and interject in between every sentence they had said to her.

They didn't need to pretend right now.

And he'd said it anyway.

He felt his heart speed up, wondering if Astrid could tell, wondering if she could feel his hands shaking next to hers, wondering if he could tell how much of that he'd really meant.

"You got that right," Astrid said, smirking.

...Maybe she hadn't heard properly. Maybe, she hadn't cared.

Either way, Hiccup felt himself breathe a sigh of relief. He didn't want to cross the line - they might be fake dating, but they were friends first, and that was all they could ever be. It was all that Astrid wanted, anyway, and he wasn't going to go against her wishes.

He'd need to stop these little slips if he wanted to keep this up. He had to keep a boundary between them. He had to.

Astrid swung her legs off the bed, and jumped onto the floor, taking a look around the room, her hands on her hips as she craned her neck to take in every inch of the place.

"So, this is where little Hiccup spent his time," Astrid said with a smile.

"Yup," Hiccup said. "This is where the magic happened."

Astrid turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "You did magic here?"

"Ha, ha."

She turned her back to him and began to look around the room again. It was a nice little room, she thought. It wasn't as big as she had expected it to be - the double bed took up most of the room. There was a desk and a chair crammed in by the window, the desk still covered in whatever Hiccup had been doing years before. The paper and pencils were exactly where he had left them, spread across the desk mid-work. More than four years had passed and they were all covered in
dust, but everything was still there, still intact. It was a little bit eerie, almost like no time at all had passed.

Hiccup joined Astrid at the desk and looked over her shoulder. "Oh," he said. "I forgot I'd been working on this."

"The Adventures Of Hiccup and Fishlegs: Fearsome Vikings Of Berk?" Astrid said, her lips quirking into a smile.

Hiccup smiled too. "It was a comic I was working on with my friend, Fishlegs. We were-"

"Vikings?" Astrid finished for him, still grinning.

"Yeah," Hiccup said, and laughed, wiping a hand down his face. "We had a whole storyline going. Man, I can't believe I forgot about this."

"Fishlegs," Astrid mumbled, shaking her head. "I thought I'd had my share of weird names from your family and friends, but apparently I was wrong."

"My family has a penchant for nicknames," Hiccup said, a smile in his voice. "Trust me, you haven't seen the half of it. Wait until the wedding."

Astrid grinned and then turned to look across one wall, which was filled from the floor to the ceiling with drawing after drawing, most of the paper yellowed and peeling.

"Dragons?" Astrid said curiously, as she narrowed her eyes at the wall to see what he'd been drawing over and over again.

Hiccup scratched the back of his head and smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "They were kind of my thing back in high school. They were my favourite thing to draw back then."

"Huh," Astrid said. "I'm learning so many interesting things about you, Haddock. You got any more secrets hidden away here?"

"Um..." Hiccup mumbled, staring at his feet.

"Bet there's a secret journal hidden around here somewhere," Astrid said, that cheeky grin back on her face.

"No," Hiccup said, covering his face with his hands.

"Did you write about girls in it? Did you write about boys? Did you write sad poetry?" she said, still grinning, beginning to search around the desk, opening one of the drawers, only to find nothing but extra stationary.

"You'll never find it!" Hiccup said.

Astrid's eyes glimmered as her grin stretched wider still. "So, there is a secret journal hidden around here? Show me!"

"No," Hiccup said, all in monotone, dropping back down on the bed.

"Come on, Hiccup," Astrid whined. "I wanna know what middle school Hiccup was up to."

"Drawing dragons and acing tests," Hiccup said. "That about sums him up."

"That's boring," Astrid said as she dropped down onto the bed beside him. "I want to know about
girlfriends. Boyfriends. Whatever little Hiccup was into."

"I've never had either."

There was a silence. Astrid blinked. "Never ever?"

"Nope."

"But... what about Maria, in university?" Astrid said, a little shocked.

Hiccup shrugged. "We dated, but it never really went anywhere."

"Amelia?"

Hiccup wrinkled his nose. "She didn't like cats."

"Lisa?"

"I didn't like her much," Hiccup said. "We went on two dates, and then I stopped returning her calls."

"Hiccup the heart breaker," Astrid commented, still staring at him wide eyed. "Wow. No wonder your parents were so excited when you brought someone home."

Hiccup shrugged. He didn't really have an answer for that, so instead of replying, he lay down on the bed and stared back up at the stars on the ceiling. After a few moments, Astrid joined him.

"Why have you never..." she mumbled, her voice trailing off. "I mean, you're a nice guy, Hiccup, and you're attractive. Why haven't you ever been in a relationship?"

Hiccup swallowed, rubbing at the neck of his sweater. He suddenly felt very hot after the attractive comment. Had Astrid noticed the sudden temperature change?

He could feel her eyes boring into the side of his head, but he couldn't look back at her. He kept his gaze fixed up on the ceiling.

"Just never came up, I guess," Hiccup mumbled. "There was no one I ever really liked that much."

Until now.

"Besides," Hiccup said, his voice a few pitches higher, "I'm not exactly boyfriend material. I spend too much time with my cat."

"You're not wrong about that. The spending too much time with the cat, not the boyfriend material part," she said, flicking him on the nose.

Hiccup made an indignant noise and turned onto his side so that she wouldn't see his smile.

“That cat still hasn’t forgiven me for what I’ve done,” Hiccup said.

They'd let Toothless out of his carrier earlier, and the cat had given Hiccup the most reproachful look. The plane journey had not been a fun experience for the little cat. He was an explorer at heart, and being trapped inside a pet carrier for the best part of a day was not in his best interests. In Toothless' eyes, Hiccup had committed the worst sort of betrayal, and there was nothing he could do to earn the cat's forgiveness.
When they’d arrived, Toothless had hissed at Hiccup and the stalked away to explore his new surroundings.

They’d probably end up with several dead mice on the front porch.

"He'll come round eventually," Astrid said, rolling her eyes. "When he remembers that you're the one that feeds him the good stuff."

"Probably," Hiccup said, and sighed, sinking down into the duvet.

The two fell into silence then, just letting the minutes go by while the two of them got lost in thought, both of them thinking about the day ahead.

Hiccup found himself wishing, not for the first time, that he could see what was going on in Astrid's head. What did she think of all this? What did she think of his home? He'd asked her so many times over the past few weeks if she'd really been sure that she was okay doing this, and every time she had sighed, rolled her eyes and told him that she was. How was Hiccup supposed to know if she was lying? Maybe she was secretly angry. Maybe she was frustrated that he'd dragged her all the way out to this tiny little island in the summer. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Hiccup tilted his head over towards her. She didn't look angry. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were rested atop her stomach, breathing gently in and out, tranquil and calm. A small smile graced her face, and she looked somehow contented.

So, maybe she wasn't angry after all. Not that Hiccup would ever be able to tell. He'd been trying for weeks to understand what went on in Astrid Hofferson's head, the same way that she always knew what was going on in his, but he'd never really mastered it.

Sometimes he thought Astrid could tell what he was thinking just by looking at his face.

He wished he could do the same for her. He wished he could unpick her brain and ask all sorts of questions. Namely, are you angry? Are you happy here? How do you feel about me?

They were the sort of questions he'd never really know. There were also other things Hiccup desperately wanted to know, but he could never ask. Do you like holding my hand? How do you like to be kissed?

All sorts of questions, none of them he could ask.

There was a boundary, and he refused to cross it, ever.

Astrid's eyes were open now, and she had shifted up in the bed, her back rested on the headboard, her fingers running through her braid, fiddling with the hairband tying it all together.

"You want to shower first or can I?" Astrid said, pulling off the hairband and sliding it around her wrist.

It had been a long day, and both of them felt pretty sticky and dirty. Hiccup's fringe was sticking to his forehead, and it wasn't until then that he realised how much he really wanted to shower.

"Oh," Hiccup said, sitting up. "You go first, by all means. You got a towel and everything?"

Astrid slid off the bed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I got everything, I know how to pack, remember."

Hiccup scowled and gave a pout. "Okay. Do you want me to leave... or?"
"I'll just close the door," Astrid said, whipping out her pyjamas and a dressing gown from the suitcase. "In a bit, Hiccup."

She disappeared into the en-suite and Hiccup sat on the bed and waited for the sounds of the shower running. He twiddled his thumbs, doing the best he could to not think about Astrid undressing.

Hiccup found himself navigating towards the desk, finding the 'The Adventures of Hiccup and Fishlegs: Fearsome Vikings of Berk' comic on the desk. The last panel was empty, unfinished. Hiccup hated leaving things unfinished.

He blew the dust off the page, and found himself a pencil, and before long he was engrossed, sketching out heads and bodies and limbs. He'd forgotten whatever younger Hiccup had in mind for the storyline, but after reading what had already been drawn he could make a few guesses, and carried on with the strip. Hiccup and Fishlegs - the finest of the Viking heroes, along with their trusty dragons. Hiccup drew a small one flying just over his comic counterpart's shoulder, missing a tail-wing. He drew an arrow to it and wrote the name 'Toothless' in block letters. Hiccup got a bit of a kick out of that.

"Finishing what you started?"

The voice made him jump - he'd been so focused on what he'd been doing that he hadn't heard the shower turn off. Astrid was standing in the bathroom doorway, her weight shifted to her left, her arms folded and her head tilted to the side, an amused smile on her face.

"Couldn't leave these two hanging," Hiccup said. "It just seemed wrong."

Astrid laughed and moved over towards him, standing at his shoulder. "You never were able to quit projects like these," Astrid said, something of a fond smile on her face.

Hiccup held his breath, hoping that she wouldn't notice how much his heart had begun to speed up when she'd come closer. She was snug in a dressing gown, her hair wrapped up in one of those towel hats that Hiccup had never understood how they worked.

Astrid let out a bark of laughter as she saw something on the page, pointing down at it. "Toothless, a dragon?"

"He's stubborn like one," Hiccup said, his voice low.

"I feel like that cat would breathe fire if he could," Astrid remarked. "Imagine the trouble he'd get into. He'd never do anything you say."

Hiccup laughed. "He never does anything I say, anyway."

Astrid grinned. "You having a shower, dragon boy?"

"Oh," Hiccup said, jumping from the chair. "Yeah, yeah. I forgot about that."

"I left a towel out for you!" Astrid called as he ran into the bathroom.

What would he do without her?

Hiccup took an extra-long time in the shower, just letting the warm water run down his back. The longer he stayed under the water, the longer he'd prolong having to share a bed with Astrid Hofferson. God, he could feel himself getting dizzy at the very concept.
He had to get out eventually though, when his skin was wrinkled and he was starting to shiver a little. He threw on an old t-shirt and pulled on his pyjama pants, before taking a deep breath and leaving the bathroom.

He could have sworn his heart jumped out of his chest.

Astrid was sitting on his bed in a t-shirt and shorts, her bare legs stretched out, her toes wiggling. She had her phone in her hands, playing on some app or another, her blonde hair loose and fanning out over her shoulders like a golden curtain.

He’d never seen her hair down before, and now he felt like he was privy to something he shouldn’t be. Her hair was always up - usually in a tight braid or ponytail, but now it was down. Hiccup's fingers itched with the sudden urge to run his hands through her hair, just to feel it, because it looked so soft and welcoming. He bundled his hands into fists and dug his nails into his palms.

*Boundaries,* he reminded himself. *Boundaries.*

"What?"

She’d noticed him staring.

He unclenched his fists, and took a breath. "Nothing," he mumbled. "Just never seen your hair down before."

"Oh," she said, surprised, running a hand through her hair. "I'd have it down more often, but it gets in my way, you know?"

"Yeah," he said, swallowing.

*Get yourself together, Haddock.*

He hovered, once again not sure if he should sit down beside her. It still felt wrong, still felt like a path that he shouldn't cross, a boundary that once broken couldn't be built again.

She was still staring at him. He wondered if he had something on his face for a moment, but then her expression changed, her eyes sparkling as her lips curled into a smile.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” she said, her voice taking on an insinuating tone that made Hiccup distinctly uncomfortable, “what these are all about?”

To his horror, she pulled out one of the condoms Val had left in the bathroom. “Because, y’know, if these have been here since high school, I really advise you not to use them.”

Hiccup turned a tomato-red, spluttering, “I- they’re not- Mum! Mum put them there! They’re not mine!”

Astrid covered her grin with her hand. “I figured.”

“She’s impossible,” Hiccup said. He was still bright red, his eyes fixed at his feet, a hand carding through his hair.

“Well, you know,” Astrid said, tilting herself across the bed and wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, “If you play your cards right...”

If Hiccup had been red before, he was positively scarlet now, barely able to from amongst his stammers.
This time Astrid didn’t try to hide her laughter, clutching her stomach. “Your face,” she said, barely able to get the words out amongst the giggles. “You’re so easy to wind up.”

Hiccup stood motionless in the middle of the room, his hands covering his face.

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed,” Astrid said. “You’re just fun to tease.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Come to bed, sweetheart.” She threw him an overexaggerated wink, patting the bed beside her.

“Stop it.”

Before he could really think about what he was doing, he slid down next to her on the bed, taking out his phone so that he could distract himself from her. He kept his eyes fixed on the small screen, but he was acutely aware of her every movement. She was still shaking slightly as her laughter subsided, her hair tickling Hiccup’s skin.

He felt like he was on edge every moment, his skin pricking and his heartbeat picking up at every brush of her shoulder. He set himself to the task of taking off his prosthetic, methodically unstrapping it from himself, taking much more time and care than he usually would. He was all too aware of Astrid’s eyes on the back of his head, watching him carefully. He settled his fake leg down beside the bed, before resting his head back on the pillow, staring up at the ceiling. There was a lump in his throat.

_This is only going to get more difficult_, Hiccup thought to himself. _Get it together._

It was getting late. Outside, the sun had dipped down behind the horizon completely, and the moon was bright in the sky. Tiredness tugged at Hiccup, and he found himself wanting for nothing more than to just dive under the covers and fall asleep, but he didn't know how to breach that subject with Astrid.

When he cast a glance over at her, it seemed like she didn't really know how to either.

"You tired?" she said, eventually, and Hiccup nodded.

"Guess we should go to bed," Hiccup said, hating how awkward his voice sounded.

"Guess so."

“So, I’ll just…” He said, his voice trailing away.

“Yeah,” Astrid mumbled.

Hiccup reached over to the lamp by his side to switch it off, wriggling down under the covers.

“Night, Hiccup.”

“Night, Astrid.”

Up above him, the constellations on the ceiling shone like actual stars.

Hiccup had never felt so warm. From his head to his toes he felt deliciously comfortable, and in that moment, he felt like he never wanted to leave. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt
like this - since university, waking up had always felt like he was being ripped away from
dreamland, with the harsh reminder that real life was calling.

There was something warm in his arms, and his legs were tangled with something. Did Toothless
get into bed with him last night? He couldn't remember. His thoughts were in that hazy state on
the edge of asleep and awake, and he found himself unable to think in straight lines.

Something tickled his chin and for a moment all he could smell is something flowery that he
couldn't quite identify. Toothless must have been fast asleep, because the something warm in his
arms was moving steadily, up and down in a smooth rhythm.

Wait.

Hiccup's thoughts slowly clicked into place.

Toothless hadn't fallen asleep with him.

It was Astrid.

His arms were wrapped around Astrid's waist, her bare legs tangled with his, her hair in his face.
For a moment, Hiccup panicked.

His arms were wrapped around Astrid Hofferson. He was cuddling Astrid Hofferson. He was
spooning Astrid Hofferson.

All of his senses were alive, the whole surface of his skin tingling, and he was frozen against her,
too afraid to move, too afraid he might wake her up. If she woke up, she'd murder him. She'd been
clear the night before - "Just don't get any genius ideas," - if she woke up, she'd be furious.

After a few moments of lying still and holding onto Astrid for dear life, his heart beating so hard
he could hear it in his throat, he slowly began to detach himself, slithering his arm away inch by
inch until he was free, and then pulling himself out of bed, going to sit at his desk.

His fingers drummed on the wood, his leg bouncing up and down uncontrollably and his heart
racing a mile a minute, trying not to think about the fact that two minutes ago, Astrid Hofferson
had been in his arms, and failing miserably because – holy shit – two minutes ago, Astrid
Hofferson had been in his arms.

Hiccup felt like his body was crying out in the absence of her, and he was fighting every urge in
him that told him he should get straight back in bed with her - pretend to be asleep, just do
anything to be near her again.

But he wouldn't. That would be crossing a line, and he wasn't going to do anything to make her
uncomfortable.

He smelled like her, he realised. He smelled like her shampoo and shower gel, the smell stuck to
his skin like a tattoo - 'Astrid Hofferson Was Here.'

Hiccup ran a hand through his hair and turned back to the desk, forcing himself to pick up a pencil
and beginning drawing.

Drawing had always been a comfort to Hiccup. When he was younger and his anxiety had been
worst, drawing was what he did to calm down. Just being able to get engrossed with something
and let the outside world become a blur to him was so calming.

"What time did you get up?"
Her voice was barely there, a croak at best.

He turned.

She was sitting up in bed, propping herself up with her hands, blinking at him with sleep filled, shiny eyes. Her face was as soft as he had ever seen it, her hair a tangled mess around her shoulders. Hiccup felt his stomach twist into knot after knot, tying itself up until he felt like he might be sick.

"Not too long ago," he said, glad to find that he was actually capable of speaking this time. "Hope I didn't wake you. You can go back to sleep if you want."

"'M awake now," she mumbled, lifting up the duvet and swinging her legs out.

Her shirt had bunched up over her chest, revealing her stomach, and her bare legs. Hiccup turned back towards the desk, staring out the window, his teeth gnawing on his lip.

"Hey, can you find my toothpaste for me?" Astrid called as she wandered into the bathroom.

"Yeah," Hiccup said, standing up and scrabbling through Astrid's washbag, finding a small tube of toothpaste.

In the bathroom, Astrid stood by the sink, toothpaste in hand. She still had that half-asleep dewy look in her eye, and in that moment, Hiccup felt like he wanted to do nothing else but kiss her.

Almost auto-pilot, Hiccup found his own toothbrush and toothpaste and began cleaning his teeth, finding himself unable to stop his eyes from sliding over towards Astrid and taking in all of her features.

Soft blonde hair. Wide blue eyes he could get lost exploring. The cutest button nose he had ever seen.

Stop, he told himself, snapping his eyes back towards the mirror, brushing his teeth, spitting into the sink and getting out of their as quickly as he could, darting back into the room and finding himself a shirt.

Without really thinking, he pulled his pyjama shirt off.

"Ah!" Astrid made a noise behind him.

Hiccup turned.

"Sorry!" she mumbled. "I didn't realise you were changing!"

She was standing in the bathroom doorway. It took him a few seconds before he registered what had happened.

Oh.

He was standing shirtless in the middle of the room, and Astrid was staring at him.

"Uh," Astrid spluttered. "Uh. Sorry. I didn't mean - I'll just - I'll just go."

Bright red, she slammed the door to the bathroom shut, leaving Hiccup in the middle of the room alone.
Heart racing, Hiccup pulled his shirt on, found a pair of jeans and pulled them over his legs, adjusting them where they had caught on his prosthetic.

He knocked on the bathroom door. "I'm, uh, decent," he mumbled, kicking himself for stammering. "You can come out now."

The door opened slightly, and Astrid's eyes and nose appeared in the crack, looking him up and down before she opened the door fully, her hands covering her face while she let out an awkward giggle.

"Sorry!" she said again, her shoulders shaking. "Sorry."

Hiccup was almost as red as she was, and he coughed once, looking down at his feet. "It's okay," he said. "I should have told you. I didn't think."

"Okay," Astrid mumbled, as the last giggles subsided. "Okay."

Another awkward silence followed, and Astrid slid around Hiccup's statue form and dove into one bags she'd brought, pulling out a hair brush and a comb, resting herself back on her bed.

Hiccup finally managed to move, forcing himself to sit back down onto the desk chair, unsure of what to do or say now. Astrid didn't seem to have any idea either; she wasn't looking at Hiccup, just staring down at her lap as she pulled hairs out of the brush.

Come on, Hiccup thought to himself. Think of something to say. Stop making this awkward.

But nothing came to mind, and all he could do was stay tongue-tied while Astrid ran her fingers through her hair and began to brush it out, waves of silky golden curls falling down her shoulders.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer."

Snarky Astrid was back, sticking her tongue out at Hiccup with the comment, her eyes glittering.

"Ha," Hiccup said, feeling able to speak. "You're the one who was getting a good look at me without a shirt on."

He couldn't help but let Snarky Hiccup sneak back through, even though he felt like his heart was jumping out of his chest while he said the quip.

Astrid turned bright red again. "I was just! I wasn't! I-" she spluttered, and Hiccup loved every minute of it, wanting to bottle up the sound.

After a few moments of not being able to come up with a good comeback, Astrid settled for throwing her comb at Hiccup, laughing when it hit him in the face.

He watched as she separated her hair into sections and began plaiting them together, into her signature braid that Hiccup was so used to. After that, she stood up and scrabbled to find some clothes from the suitcase.

"I'm going into the bathroom to change," Astrid said, matter of fact. "Don't walk in on me."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Hiccup muttered before turning back to his project on the table, pencil in hand and nose bent towards the paper.

She disappeared into the other room, and Hiccup broke into a smile.
"How did you two sleep?" Val said, smiling brightly as the two of them wandered downstairs.

There was a wonderful smell wafting from the kitchen, bacon and eggs sizzling in a pan on a stove, Stoick holding a spatula.

"Wonderfully," Astrid said, shooting a sideways glance towards Hiccup. "Best I have in a while, actually."

"Lovely. Breakfast will be ready soon, I hope you're hungry."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Astrid said, politely.

"NO," Hiccup said, loudly.

Stoick and Val turned and stared at him, blinking in surprise.

"No," Hiccup said, a little quieter, putting his hands on Astrid's shoulders. "Trust me, you wouldn't want Astrid helping in the kitchen. It would be a disaster. In fact, we should probably leave right now, just in case something happens."

Astrid elbowed him.

"I'm saying this out of love, my dear," Hiccup said, clicking into fake relationship mode automatically, without having to think about it. "Love and concern that everyone might get food poisoning."

Stoick let out a loud laugh, a rumble from his belly. "Val's the same," he said. "You wouldn't want to go anywhere near her food."

"Haddock women were not born natural cooks," Val said.

"You're not even a Haddock yet, technically," Hiccup pointed out.

"Just because I haven't officially got the name Haddock doesn't mean I'm not a Haddock," Val said, poking him in the stomach. "People have been calling me Mrs. Haddock for years. I've been a Haddock longer than you have."

Hiccup laughed. "Point taken, Mum."

"I for one can't wait for you to properly be Mrs. Haddock," Stoick added, flipping the bacon with his spatula. "It's been long enough."

"That it has, Stoick. That it has," Val said, her eyes shining as she pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. "Now away with the two of you. Go set the table."

Hiccup and Astrid left the room, smiling, taking handfuls of cutlery into the dining room, putting table mats around the table and the right amount of knives and forks.

"Your parents are cute," Astrid muttered into Hiccup's ear.

"You're telling me," Hiccup said. "I think they're out-doing us in the cute couple factor."
Astrid cocked an eyebrow, and grinned. "You want to give them a show?"

This was flirting. Astrid was flirting. Right?

More than that, though, her eyes were twinkling, her face set in that same expression of cockiness and determination that he'd seen so many times before. She was offering him a challenge.

And Hiccup was never one to back down.

His lips quirked, his eyes shining as he grabbed her hand and said, "You're on."

Stoick and Val entered the room then, with plates laden with fried eggs, bacon and pancakes. As they put the plates down, Astrid darted towards Hiccup and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek.

It took a while for his smile to die down.

With one look from Astrid, a challenge had been set: Who Can Be The Grossest Couple was in motion, and Hiccup was never one to back down from a challenge, certainly not from Astrid, no matter how much this particular challenge made his stomach flip. The goal? Be the grossest, soppiest, most in-love couple possible.

As they made their way down to Berk's pool, Hiccup let his fingers dangle and brush with hers, and she responded with a grin, tangling their fingers together, so he pulled her closer and wrapped an arm around her waist. After this, she nuzzled her head on his shoulder, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

His heart fluttered, the butterflies in his stomach kicking up a storm. Apparently, this challenge was going to be harder than he thought.

Beside them, Stoick and Val were cooing at every little move, at every little touch.

"You too are so sweet together," Val said, a permanent smile lighting up her face.

"Don't embarrass them," Stoick said gruffly, but he too was grinning. The two of them were having a field day.

Val poked him. "I'm a mother, it's my job."

Astrid smiled, her fingers still wrapped tight around Hiccup's, swinging their hands back and forth. "I'm just lucky to have him."

That was an opening if Hiccup had ever saw one. "No," he said, "I'm lucky to have you."

A glint flashed in Astrid's eyes. "No," she said, her smile twisting, "I'm lucky to have you."

"I think you'll find," he said, slinging his arm over Astrid's shoulder, "that I'm luckier."

"I'm luckiest!"

"I'm luckiest plus one!"

"I'm luckiest plus infinity!"
Stoick and Val roared with laughter.

"Now, now," Stoick said, his massive shoulders shaking. "No need to fight."

Astrid grinned, and snuggled into Hiccup's shoulder. His heart was thumping, and he was smiling so much that his cheeks hurt. Right here, right now, back on the island he grew up, with Astrid Hofferson in his arms, was the happiest he'd ever felt. And if the reminder that this wasn't real, and in a couple of weeks it'd all be over came up in his brain, well, he pushed it away and pretended the thought didn't exist. All that mattered to him was the present, and in the present, Astrid's fingers were gliding over his, her head lolling over his shoulder, blonde hair tickling his skin.

He was grounded a little, however, when they arrived at the poolside. They found a set of deckchairs close to the pool edge, tossed their towels over them and settled down. Almost as soon as they'd sat down, Astrid had whipped off her shirt and shorts, revealing a small, blue bikini.

Hiccup's mouth went dry, and immediately he had to snap his eyes forward to stop them from roaming across her bare skin.


He sat awkwardly on his deckchair, forcing himself to look firmly towards the pool. He kept his fingers locked together on his stomach, his whole body frozen as he tried to process this new development that once again, he really should have been prepared for.

Astrid did not seem to share his qualms, however; no sooner had they sat down was she happily rubbing her skin with sun block, humming happily to herself.

"Do my back?"

"W-what?" Hiccup gulped, broken out of his reverie.

He allowed himself to look over at her. She was holding the sun cream bottle out to him expectantly.

"Do my back?" she repeated. "I can't reach and I don't wanna get burned."

His parents were watching from the side, peeking over their sunglasses at the two of them. Hiccup still felt like he couldn't move, eyes fixed on the bottle as if it would jump out and bite him. Astrid was still looking at him, eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Sure," Hiccup squeaked, his voice much higher in pitch than usual. He swallowed, trying to make himself sound more normal. "I can do that."

She flipped over onto her stomach, and Hiccup, heart thumping hard, forced his hands to move, spraying the cream onto Astrid's back and rubbing it into the skin. He worked methodically, trying his best to do a good job and not thinking about the implications.

*I am not enjoying this*, he said to himself. *I am not enjoying this.*

He was just being a good friend. This was what good friends did. There was no reason to act like this wasn’t normal, whether or not he could feel his parents' gaze hot on his back.

"Done," he said, hating how strained his voice sounded.

He went back to lying down on the deckchair, staring back out into the pool, pretending to be
very interested in the two kids splashing about at the opposite end of the pool, ducking each other's heads underwater.

Astrid was watching him, amused. She cast an eye over at Hiccup's parents, before lowering her voice and saying, "You don't need to be so polite, y'know. I wore this to look good."

Hiccup flushed bright crimson. "I wasn't- I didn't-"

"Relax, Hiccup," Astrid said, with a grin. "You're my boyfriend. You're allowed to look."

He knew that it was all for show, but something about Astrid calling him her boyfriend made his heart speed up. He twisted on the deckchair onto his side, facing her and looking at her properly.

It shouldn't have been a surprise to him by now, but it hit him like a ton of bricks anyway: Astrid Hofferson was heart stopping, earth shattering, make-your-mouth-go-dry beautiful. He was having trouble forming coherent sentences. He wanted to say something smart, anything that could break the tension, and he tried to gather up all the wit he had to say something just right, but all he could do was focus on a spot on her nose, where there was a still a smudge of sun cream.

"You - you missed a spot," he said feebly, gesturing at her face.

She rubbed her face. "Gone?"

"Here," Hiccup said, leaning forward before his brain could stop his body from moving. He cupped her cheek, and wiped his thumb across her nose.

For a moment, he froze, as if he'd only just realised what he was doing, and the world around them melted as he stared into Astrid's eyes. His fingers curled around her chin, and for a moment he was lost in a daze, struck by the idea that he could move mere inches and he would be kissing her.

Then, as if by magic, the spell was broken, and Hiccup moved away from her, his hand immediately going behind him as he nervously scratched the back of his head. Astrid appeared to be in a daze too; she kept frozen in space for a moment or two after the moment.

But she was the first to break: after a few seconds of silence, she sprang from her chair. "I'm going for a swim," she said, brightly, rocking back and forward on her feet. Then, before Hiccup could process any of this, she headed towards the deep end, flipping off the edge into the water in a feat of grace and athleticism that only Astrid Hofferson would be capable of.

Hiccup chose the safer option, shifting himself down the ladder inch by inch, wincing every time a new piece of bare skin touched the cold water. He trod carefully, his fingers gripping onto the ladder, careful not to slip on his prosthetic as he slid down into the pool, shivering with every movement. Astrid seemed not to notice the temperature, swimming about and ducking underneath like she'd born in it.

For a moment, Hiccup tread water, still feeling the tension from minutes before, and realising that he had absolutely no idea what to say her.

But then, a familiar glint flashed in Astrid's eyes, her lips curling into a smirk, before she slapped her hands together in the water, driving it over and drenching him.

Now this was territory Hiccup knew; he responded by making an even bigger splash.

"No mercy!" Astrid said, that mischievous grin wider than ever, as she held her hands together in the water, driving it over and drenching him.
Hiccup spluttered, coughing up water. "You're in for it!" he said, and ducked down underwater, pulling her with him. She struggled and kicked at him, and they both gasped as they resurfaced, giggling hard.

"Just you wait, Haddock," she hissed, darting over the side of the pool and grabbing one of the pool noodles, brandishing it like weapon and advancing on him.

"No fair!" Hiccup said, scrambling to get to the other side of the pool. "I'm unarmed!"

This did nothing to appease Astrid, whose face had become the perfect picture of childish glee - this was a war, and one that she intended to win. Hiccup managed to retrieve his own weapon just in the nick of time, and the two engaged in deadly combat: the battle of the pool noodles.

This continued on for many minutes, until some poor, tired-looking pool attendant appeared at the scene and asked them politely to stop.

Hiccup and Astrid left the pool, both hiding giggles behind their hands. They'd managed to clear out the whole pool in their tussle - all the kids that had been playing had abandoned the water in favour of the deckchairs, watching the ensuing fight.

"Hiccup," Astrid said, her voice somewhat amused. "Did you know your leg is weeing?"

Hiccup turned at blinked at her, the nonsensical statement taking a moment to sink in, but then he looked down at his leg and laughed. Water was spilling out the back of the prosthetic onto the tiled floor.

"Yeah, it does that," he said, grinning. “There’s a hole in the back so that it doesn’t fill up with water. I always forget about that.”

Astrid tipped her head to the side and smiled. “That’s pretty cool, Hiccup.”

Hiccup shrugged. “I never really thought about it.”

They made their way back to their deckchairs where Stoick and Val were waiting for them, the same expectant smiles that they'd had on all day still plastered across their faces. Hiccup left Astrid on the deckchair, combing through her hair with wet fingers, and went to join his parents.

"What?" Hiccup said, after a few moments of them just smiling and staring.

"Nothing," Val said. "It's just - you two remind us of us when we were your age."

Hiccup smiled and his eyes flickered between his Mum and Dad. "What, you used to have pool noodle fights?"

"My boy-" Stoick uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, grinning in a similar mischievous fashion- "I was the king of pool noodle fights."

Val elbowed him. "I just meant youthful. Boisterous," she said. "It's wonderful to see you having so much fun. That girl brings out the best in you.'

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck. "She's something else."

"She certainly is."

"Come on Val," Stoick said, nudging Val's arm, "You make it sound like we don't have fun anymore."
Val smiled. "Of course we do," she said. "I just meant that we're not that young anymore."

"We still seemed pretty spry last night," Stoick said, with a wink.

"Oh my god, gross," Hiccup said. "I'm leaving now."

He turned on his heel and head back towards Astrid.

"I hope you're using those condoms we left you!" Stoick yelled at Hiccup's back, earning him a groan. "I don't want grandkids this soon!"

"Stoick!" Val chided, "We're in a public place!"

"Let me have my fun," Stoick said, laughing. "I never get to tease that boy."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, watching their son return to his girlfriend.

"He looks happy."

"Yeah, he does."

Meanwhile, Hiccup was hurrying back over to Astrid, disgusted face still on as he tried to erase the images in his mind.

"What was that all about?" Astrid said, now wrapped in a towel.

"Nothing." Hiccup scowled. "They never miss an opportunity to embarrass me."

Astrid grinned. "I've noticed."

"You encourage them."

"I do not."

"You do."

"Well, yeah, okay, maybe a little bit..."

Back at the house that night, Hiccup could still smell the chlorine on his skin as he got ready for bed, the image of Astrid wet-haired and in a bikini still fresh in his mind, made worse by the fact that she was sleeping right beside him, blonde hair fanning across the pillows.

Good god, he was in trouble.

Hiccup took Astrid to the beach.

They were double-dating with Stoick and Val, still trying to one-up them of course, but Hiccup’s parents were way off in the distance, out of vision and ear-shot.

The sea frothed against the sandy shore, the taste of sea spray on their lips, the sound of seagulls cawing and playing across the cliff side.

They bundled up in jeans and hoodies - it might have been summer, but that didn't mean it was hot on the Isle of Berk or anywhere else in England. Astrid had her hands stuffed in her pockets, as
they walked along, kicking sand and stones up with their shoes, leaving footprints behind them.

The pair of them stood close to each other, but never quite touching. They weren't on show here. For now, they were just friends, no matter how much it made Hiccup's heart ache.

"It's beautiful," Astrid mumbled, a little stunned as she stared down at the waves, rushing up and down on the sand.

Hiccup blinked at her. "Have you never been to a beach before?"

"Not for a very, very long time," Astrid said, kicking up a stone with the tip of her shoe. "I don't remember much, but it definitely wasn't as good as this."

Hiccup smiled and looked out to sea, enjoying the feeling of wind on his face, his hair flapping.

"When I was younger I was so shocked to realise that there were some people who had never been to a beach before," Hiccup said, his thumbs in his pockets, his fingers tapping on the outside of his jeans. "I didn't realise that not everyone had one within walking distance from them."

Astrid laughed. "You were lucky."

"Yeah," Hiccup said. "I don't think I realised how much until I left for university."

They kept walking in amiable silence, and kept going, just listening to the sounds of the wind and the sea, working together in harmony to lap at the sand.

Eventually they came to a stop, and sat down in the sand. Hiccup held his knees up to his chest, resting his arms on top, putting his chin on top of his hands.

"I used to come here all the time when I was feeling bad to calm down," Hiccup said, his voice softer. He didn't look at Astrid, even though she was staring at him, and kept his gaze fixed out on the sea. "Especially after the accident."

He felt Astrid suck in a breath.

"I always forget about that," Astrid said, and Hiccup did look at her then, watching the way the wind blew strands of her blonde hair out of her face in wisps. "...Is that wrong?"

Hiccup thought about it, and shook his head. "I don't want people to treat me differently because of it."

Astrid nodded. "I get that."

She stared down at her fingers, twisting and untwisting them together. She dug a little hole in the sand and smoothed it over. "Does it still hurt?"

Hiccup's eyes flickered over towards her again. "Sometimes," he said. "Not as much as when it first happened, but sometimes it aches."

She kept flipping the sand over with her finger, digging a hole and then smoothing it over. Digging a hole and smoothing it over. Her fingernails were filled with sand.

Then she asked the question he'd been expecting her to ask for years, but she never had. "How did it happen?" Her voice is low, small. She was still staring at him.

Hiccup’s arms wrapped around himself with a much tighter grip, his fingers interlacing and holding on tight to his hands.
"Car accident," Hiccup mumbled.

*Don't ask anything more*, he thought to himself. *Don't.*

She stared at him for a good long time, and for a moment he was so sure that he was going to keep asking him about it, keep prying for information in the hopes of being supportive but actually doing the opposite.

He could feel her eyes narrowing on him. Then, she looked out to sea.

“Actually, I do remember the first time I went to the beach,” Astrid said, twiddling her fingers together. She tucked her legs under her chin and wrapped her arms around them, clutching them to her chest. “It’s fuzzy, but I remember bits and pieces. I was four years old and it was a family holiday, in Cornwall. I’d never seen the sea before, and I didn’t understand how it worked.”

Hiccup stared at her, silent, just listening. Astrid tucked a few stray strands of hair behind her ear before continuing. “I was terrified,” Astrid said, looking back out at the sea and grinning. “The ocean was so big and it stretched for miles and miles and it just seemed like it would never end. I didn’t understand tides. I thought the waves were just going to keep coming and coming and then I’d get washed away with it.”

Hiccup gave a small smile.

“My parents have got an old picture of me and my Dad, standing at the edge of the sea, with me clutching onto his hand with both of mine so that the sea didn’t take me away,” Astrid said, her voice a little softer. She rested her chin upon her knees, staring at the waves again. “Eventually we learned about tides in geography class and I stopped being so afraid.”

“I’m glad,” Hiccup said, his voice small. “Otherwise you might never have come here.”

"It's a beautiful place. Thanks for showing me it," she said, a smile tugging at her features.

He smiled back at her, so grateful that she changed the subject. Somehow, she'd seen how much he didn’t want to talk about it. Somehow, she'd known he was uncomfortable, and she'd done something to fix it.

She’d never know how grateful he was that she knew that.

There was blue in every direction.

Their adventures that day had taken them to Berk's aquarium, and they had spent their time walking alone together through the tunnel, gazing up at all the fish and sea creatures that were on show.

"They're perfect!"

Astrid stood back, watching fondly as Hiccup pressed his nose up against the glass, the sea lion bumping its snout the other side. Hiccup's eyes were wide and shining in fascination, his hands curling up against the glass.

"I love them so much," he whispered.
Astrid cocked an eyebrow, amused. "Are you crying?"

"No," Hiccup said quickly, flicking the tear that had threatened to leak from the corner of his eye.

"You always get like this," Astrid said, her voice not at all accusatory, instead fond and sweet, "every time we see a cute animal. It's like you want to take them all home with you."

"I would if I could," Hiccup mumbled. "But I'd have nowhere to keep them. The costs of building an aquarium that big alone..."

"Also, you have a very territorial cat who constantly demands your attention."

"That too."

Astrid smiled softly, and sank down onto one of the benches, crossing her legs and gazing up at the aquarium above her. Seals swam around, gliding through the water without a care in the world.

"It's nice seeing you like this," Astrid said.

"Like what?"

"Happy. Content. You're usually so... stressed about things."

Hiccup wrinkled his nose. "I'm not, am I?"

"You do tend to worry about things a lot, Hiccup."

"Huh." Hiccup joined her on the bench, leaning back and looking up at the blue above them. "It's something about this place. It's calming."

"Yeah. I get that."

Hiccup watched as a seal swam overhead. "Do you think they worry about things like we do?"

"How so?"

"It seems like the life, y'know, to swim around and do nothing all day?" he said. "But do they wake up and wonder what they're going to do with their day? Does it get boring? Do they have parental issues? Do they wonder why they're there?"

Astrid grinned. "Do they wonder if there's a seal-god?"

"Stop teasing me."

She smiled, shifting closer to him. "Hiccup," she said, winding her arm around his, "you have the strangest mind. Never get rid of it."

Then she moved closer still, her head drooping and nestling at his neck, her eyes fluttering shut. Her fingers slid down beside his, and slowly, their fingers intertwined. It felt, Hiccup realised with a jolt, somewhat natural. He let his head fall too, resting atop hers. His eyes slid upwards to watch the seals gently press against the glass before swimming away.

Hiccup's parents were nowhere to be seen.
Waking up next to Astrid was becoming harder and harder.

On the fifth day of their little holiday, Hiccup slipped out of the bed earlier than usual, sneaking down the stairs and outside, sinking down to sit on the porch steps. He wrapped his arms around himself to warm himself in the cool morning air, drumming his legs up and down. Toothless had finally forgiven Hiccup for the plane flight, and followed him outside, mewing gently at his feet. Hiccup scratched him behind the ears.

“ Toothless, I’m in so much trouble, ” he mumbled.

Every day Hiccup felt like Astrid’s scent was sticking to his skin. No matter how many times he showered, he’d never managed to get the smell of her to leave him, and the worst part was that he didn’t want it to go. He’d found himself drifting into fantasy all too often, imagining what their life would be like if all of this was real: waking up together in one of their apartments, making breakfast together, being in each other’s space every single day.

Hiccup had woken that morning as the sun filtered through the window, the birds beginning to chirp outside. Astrid was still fast asleep on the bed, her head lolling to the side, golden hair splayed in wisps around the pillow. Her mouth was slightly parted, tiny snores emerging as she breathed in a steady rhythm. Not for the first time - or the second, third or even fourth time - he thought about kissing her. He knew exactly how he’d do it. He’d run his fingers through her hair, cup her cheek and slowly brush his lips against hers, his eyes shut as he let himself melt against her. The more he saw her dewy eyed, hair a mess from sleep, wearing nothing but a loose shirt and shorts, the worse the fantasies got.

Then he remembered that watching people sleep was creepy as hell, and he high-tailed it out of the room as quickly as possible.

“I’m in too deep,” he muttered, as Toothless rubbed his body against Hiccup’s legs, crying out for attention.

He was being unfair to Astrid, and he knew that well. He’d asked so much of her over the past month, and she’d done everything and more to rise to the occasion. There weren’t enough drinks in the world to thank her for this.

“Hiccup?”

Speak of the devil. Hiccup turned to find Astrid, wrapped in a blanket, and leaning against the stair banisters just in front of the open door. She was still half-asleep, her eye lids at half-mast as she blinked at him, bleary-eyed.

“What are you doing up so early?” she said, and then covered her mouth as she stifled a yawn.

“I dunno,” Hiccup mumbled. “ Catching the morning breeze. Watching the sunrise. Toothless was getting a little antsy so…”

As if on cue, Toothless mewed loudly, and Hiccup scratched him behind the ears as thanks for backing up his pathetic excuse.

“You never used to get up this early,” Astrid muttered, stumbling out onto the porch, and sinking
down next to him.

Hiccup kept his eyes straight forward. He couldn’t tell her that she was the reason he was rushing out of bed every morning. Luckily for him, Astrid kept talking.

“I used to have to drag you out of bed every morning,” Astrid said, her breath catching in the chilly morning air. “I’d have to bang on your door until one of your poor flatmates got fed up and let me in.”

“Those were the days.”
Astrid wrinkled her nose. “They really weren’t. I don’t miss being a Hiccup alarm clock.”

“Now I have my own little furry alarm clock, don’t I?” He ran a hand through Toothless’ fur.

Toothless meowed indignantly, and strode towards Astrid for her affection. Astrid grinned, her voice taking on a high pitch as she scratched behind his ears, “your master’s such a pain, isn’t he? Isn’t he?” Toothless rubbed his body up against Astrid’s legs, purring contentedly. “Oh, look, Hiccup, he likes me more than you!”

Hiccup scowled. “No loyalty. No loyalty at all.”

“He’s always liked me better,” Astrid said, with a grin. “Anyway, I was going to ask, are you okay?”

“Hmm?” Hiccup blinked at her. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. I just woke up and you weren’t there. Didn’t know where you’d gone,” she said. Her focus was still on the cat, her fingers trailing through his fur.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled. “I was just awake. Thought I’d take Toothless out.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Astrid said, hopping to her feet, “I am going back to bed. It is way too early. See you at breakfast.”

“Bye.”

Hiccup couldn’t help but smile as he watched Astrid retreat into the house, blanket still around her shoulders. When he realised what he was doing, he turned back to Toothless, his head slumping into hands.

“I really am in too deep,” he groaned.

This really, really had to stop.

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Astrid was holding a long white wedding drape in her hands.

Their second week on the Isle of Berk had dawned, wedding preparations were fully underway, and Hiccup and Astrid had been swept under a tidal wave of duties and responsibilities.

“I hate to ask,” Val would say before sending them out on another errand, “but this really needs to get done, and you two are the only ones free. I don’t want to interrupt your holiday, but—”

“We’ll do it,” Hiccup always said, quickly, in the interest of keeping himself busy so that he could
give himself a distraction from a relentless problem in the form of a hopeless crush that was only becoming worse, and worse, and worse.

Astrid had no inkling of Hiccup’s real reasons they were keepings so busy, but it suited her itchy feet and her need to help just well, and soon enough she was running around the Isle of Berk on errand after errand, carrying boxes, buying decorations, helping to track down favours and flowers and everything else under the sun. Their errands had led them to the barn where Hiccup’s parents were going to hold the reception, and Hiccup was watching as Astrid teetered precariously on a stepladder, balancing on one foot as she attempted to hang the drapes over the rafters.

Hiccup watched her, his teeth worrying against the bottom of his lip. “Don’t fall,” he called up at her, rather unhelpfully.

“I’m not going to fall,” Astrid said through gritted teeth. Her voice was muffled, her mouth filled with pins. She took one out and reached as high as she could to stick the long sheath of white silk in place. She wobbled, and for a moment it really did look like she was going to fall, but she steadied herself before she could.

Hiccup readied himself beneath the step-ladder, trying to give the illusion that he’d be ready to catch her if she did fall, even though he knew that if he tried, they’d both end up on the floor. She made a few more grunts, busying herself with pinning the slippery fabric in a new spot, her arms stretching out to a new spot, rising higher on her tip-toes.

“Be careful,” Hiccup said. Astrid didn’t even dignify him with a response.

She’d been a little off with him all day. Maybe it was all the running around doing jobs for his mother that had her frustrated, or maybe she was just tired, either way, she’d been a little more curt than unusual with him. He resolved to make sure she took a break after this, no matter what Val wanted them to do next.

“Well, well, this looks like busy work.”

It was a familiar voice, and one that set Hiccup’s skin on edge. He turned, and sure enough, there was Alvin, leaning casually against one of the barn doors, a twisted grin across his face and a nasty glint in his eye. Hiccup plastered on a fake smile.

“Alvin,” he said, putting on a forced, bright voice. “You’re here early.”

“Didn’t want to miss this. Haven’t you heard? This is supposed to be the event of the season,” Alvin said.

There was an edge to Alvin’s voice that made Hiccup distinctly uncomfortable. He didn’t have time to dwell on it, though, because behind him there was a loud scream, and a thump.

Hiccup turned, and saw that Astrid had slipped from the stepladder - she landed, luckily, in one of the decoration hay bales, rubbing her back and swearing loudly.

“Astrid!” He ran over and joined her side, holding a hand out to pull her up.

“Don’t touch me, Haddock,” she grumbled, pushing his hand away.

Apparently falling on her butt had done nothing for her mood.

“Oh, Astrid, my dear!” Val, who had appeared at the front of the barn just in time to see Astrid fall, sped past Alvin and Hiccup to bend down and help Astrid up. “C’mon, let’s get you back to the house.”
“I’m fine, Mrs. Haddock, really,” Astrid said, between pained grunts.

“Call me Val, dear, please,” Val said, supporting Astrid as they made their way towards the door. As she passed Hiccup, she clipped him over the head. “Honestly, Hiccup, why weren’t you watching the ladder?”

Hiccup made a few helpless noises that Val ignored. “You stay here and clean up the rest of this mess,” she said. Hiccup made a move as if to protest. Val gave him a stern look. “I mean it, Hiccup.”

Hiccup watched as Val helped Astrid out of the barn, leaving him alone with Alvin.

He turned to gather up the leftover silk that had been left on the floor, and began to fold it up and put it into the basket it they’d brought it in. He was all too aware of Alvin’s presence, hovering behind him like a bad smell, his gaze on his back. Hiccup kept folding, determined not to let it get to him.

Alvin was the first to break the silence. “She’s a very pretty girl, that Astrid.”

Hiccup’s jaw clicked. “Yes. She is.”

“You must like her very much.”

“I do,” Hiccup said, keeping his eyes fixed on his work, methodically folding up the white material.

Alvin was still watching him, his eyes boring into Hiccup’s back. “What a pity this is all going to end soon,” he said.

Hiccup gritted his teeth. He hadn’t forgotten that Alvin knew that he and Astrid were faking it, and the thought put him on edge. He was fairly sure that Alvin wasn’t going to tell anyone - however unpleasant Alvin was, he’d never managed to cause any real problems, and even if he did, there was no saying that his family would believe the word of ‘Alvin the Treacherous’- but even so, there was a sing-song lilt to Alvin’s voice that made Hiccup sure that he was up to something.

He stood up, taking the basket with him, and turned to Alvin, keeping a wary eye on the shiny hook he had for a hand. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“How proud your parents must be,” Alvin said, “that you found a girl like her.”

“I’m sure they’re thrilled,” Hiccup said, crisply.

“Don’t you think they’ll be devastated when they find out it’s not real?”

Hiccup pressed his lips into a thin line, refusing to give an answer, and heading towards the entrance of the barn, basket balanced on his hip.

Alvin’s eyebrows shot upwards. “Oh, were you not planning on telling them at all?” he said, a hint of glee behind his scandalized tone. “Well, I hope Miss Hofferson is prepared for that.”

Hiccup stilled, turned, and looked at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just that this whole situation must be a little uncomfortable for her,” Alvin said, examining his hook. “If only you could see her when you’re not around. It’s so obvious she doesn’t want to be here.”
“That’s not true,” Hiccup said, flatly. “She wouldn’t have come if she didn’t want to.”

But it felt false almost as soon as he’d said it. He thought back to the reunion, when Stoick and Val had announced that their wedding and invited Hiccup and Astrid. She’d been furious - “It was only supposed to be for one day, Hiccup. You promised.” - she hadn’t wanted to come in the first place. Had he forced her? Had she been resenting him this whole time?

Alvin noticed Hiccup faltering, the glint in his eye shining. “Poor dear looks so uncomfortable,” he said, “can’t imagine what it must be like, to have to pretend to have feeling for someone you don’t feel anything for, and she’s such a lovely young lady, she’d probably never admit it how bad she must feel.” He grinned. “Better be careful, Hiccup. Don’t try and get more than you deserve, or you’ll lose what you already had.”

Then he drifted away, leaving Hiccup alone in the empty barn.

Hiccup didn’t go home.

At least, he didn’t right away. Rather than gathering up the silk meant for the rafters and taking it back to the house like he’d initially planned, he busied himself with getting further down on Val’s list, doing as many things as he could to get things ready for the wedding. As far as he was concerned, the more he could do to avoid seeing Astrid, the better. Outside the barn it had started to rain, and in true Isle of Berk fashion, what started as a drizzle, soon became a downpour. Hiccup ignored it, heaving the barn doors shut so that none of the decorations would get wet, and then carried on his work.

Alvin’s words kept ringing in his head, and no matter how much he tried to convince himself they weren’t true, he couldn’t help the sinking feeling that had made its home in stomach. As mean spirited as Alvin’s words had been, they were grounded in truth. Hiccup had been taking advantage of her. He’d let himself get too deep in the lie, he was starting to believe it was true.

He’d let this go way too far, he thought to himself bitterly, as he dragged bales of hay around to find their perfect position. Last week in the aquarium, the dim light overhead, Astrid’s fingers curled in his, he’d almost kissed her. No one had been there to see it, no one was watching, there was no need to act up, and yet he’d been making her act like a couple again. The more he thought about it, the more he realised that his was what he’d been doing all along: he’d promised himself that he wouldn’t cross any boundaries, and yet, he’d been doing nothing else for weeks.

It had to stop.

Eventually, Hiccup braved the rain outside and dragged himself back to the house. By the time he got there, he was sodden, soaked through, but resolute: the facade he’d made with Astrid had to stay strictly in front of people; by themselves, they could be nothing but friends.

He found her sitting cross-legged on the bed, her head tilted to the side as she brushed her hair out in long strokes. He swallowed, and knew he was making the right decision when his heartbeat lifted. This had to stop.

“Hiccup!” she said, her eyes lighting up when she saw him. “I was wondering where you’d got to, I thought I’d have to send Val out with a search party.”

Hiccup leaned against the door frame. “Thought I’d just carry on with the list,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “You alright? After the fall?”
Astrid smiled, and Hiccup wished she wouldn’t. Something about that smile made his insides melt. “I’m fine,” she said. “Didn’t break anything. Sorry for snapping at you. I hope you weren’t worried.”

“No,” Hiccup said. “That’s good.”

Astrid blinked at him, and there was a slight pause before she said, “well, I’m pretty tired, so I was thinking about going to bed soon,” she said, springing to her feet and smoothing down the duvet covers. “You good?”

“Actually,” Hiccup said, “I think I’ll sleep on the sofa tonight.”

For a moment, Astrid froze, her hands hovering mid-air. Then she rolled her eyes and shot him a grin. “Hiccup, we’ve been over this, I don’t care about us sharing a bed—”

“I know,” Hiccup said, linking his fingers together and stretching his arms up in the air. One thing Alvin said had stuck out in particular—“she’d probably never admit how bad she must feel”—he wasn’t going to let himself off the hook. “I just think it’d be better if I just… slept on the sofa.”

Astrid stilled. “Have I done something wrong?” she asked, after a few moments had passed.

“No,” Hiccup said, quickly. “No, God no, Astrid, nothing. It’s just that I don’t want to keep taking up your personal space. It’s not fair. I should have been sleeping on the sofa from the beginning.”

“Hiccup, we’ve been sharing a bed for a week, why are you so bothered about this now?” Astrid said, her voice low.

“I don’t know,” Hiccup mumbled. “I just felt like I was being unfair.”

Astrid ran a hand through her hair. “What about keeping up appearances? What if your parents notice?”

“I’ll wake up before they do.”

“Hiccup,” she said, sighing and rubbing her face. “I don’t want to take your bed away from you. If this is what you really want, let me sleep on the sofa.”

Hiccup shook his head, vigorously. “No. I’m not letting you sleep downstairs, especially not with your injury.”

“I told you, I’m not hurt.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said and put on a fake smile. “It’ll be more comfortable than you think.”

There was another long pause, and then Astrid sighed again. “Well, if that’s what you want, Hiccup.”

No.

“It is,” Hiccup said, turning away and rummaging through his chest of drawers so he wouldn’t have to look at her. He found a shirt he could use as pyjamas and then made for the door, turning to look over his shoulder at her before she left.

She was sitting cross-legged on his bed again.
“Okay,” she said.

Then she went back to fiddling with the ends of her hair, staring down at the strands and not looking up at him.

“Oh, Okay,” Hiccup mumbled, and turned away, leaving her alone in the room.

The next morning, Hiccup woke up alone on the sofa, a crick in his neck and his limbs aching. He shivered with cold, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing.

He avoided her as much as he possibly could for the next few days.

If no one else was around, Hiccup found a way to not be around Astrid - he’d make up some excuse, invent an errand Val had sent him on and escape somewhere else. It was the only way to avoid any more unwanted situations with her. Alvin’s words had hit him hard, and Hiccup had resolved that no matter what, he would not make things uncomfortable for her. He’d got her into this mess, he wouldn’t make it worse for her.

It was all well and good, before Val and Stoick had dragged them out one morning, arms around the two of them.

“Will you at least tell us where we’re going?” Hiccup grumbled as he was pushed along the gravel path by his father.

“Dance lessons!”

Hiccup dug his heels into ground. “Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.”

“What?

“I’m not dancing.”

Stoick grinned, as if he’d expected this. “It’s a wedding, Hiccup. Of course you’re dancing. You wouldn’t want to leave Astrid without a partner, would you?”

He glanced over at Astrid, who was walking beside them. Her expression was blank.

“I can’t dance, Dad, you know I can’t,” Hiccup said, quickly. “I’ve got two left feet. Wait, no, I’ve only got one left foot! I’ve only got one foot! This is cruel, Dad. Cruel!”

Beside him, Astrid giggled, and then covered her mouth, as if she’d been surprised by her own laughter. Hiccup glanced her way, and started walking properly. “Fine,” he said, with a pout. “But I’m telling you, this isn’t going to go well.”

It didn’t go well.

To no one’s surprise, Hiccup was not a good dancer. His limbs stuck out awkwardly, his feet seemed to have a mind of their own, and no matter what, he couldn’t stay on rhythm. They were in the barn, a CD player balanced on one of the hay bales, the dance teacher Val had hired perched above them all and calling out criticisms. Stoick and Val spun around in each other’s arms as gracefully as anything, and Astrid top-of-the-dance-class Hofferson was, of course, as elegant and as poised as a person could be.
She’d been a little distant at the beginning, a little more quiet than usual, but after a while, the old Astrid Hofferson began to leak back as they spun around the dance floor.

“I don’t understand how you’re so bad at this,” she said, after he’d stepped on her toes for the fourth time. “It’s easy.”

“Easy for you maybe,” Hiccup grumbled, staring down at his feet and wondering how he usually managed to get them to do what he said.

Astrid rolled her eyes. “This kind of dancing is remarkably sexist,” she said. “So, against my better judgment and understanding of gender politics, let me be the man.”

“You what?”

“I’ll lead, all you’ve gotta do is follow.”

She put one of his arms on her shoulder, and then the other on her waist - his heartbeat rose significantly - and then lead him round the room. At first, Hiccup stared down at his feet, watching the steps and being careful not to step on her feet again, but after a while, his feet had started to do the work for him, and he was looking at her face again.

She was smiling at him, her eyes twinkling. God, it was so nice to see her smile. He’d been avoiding her so much that he hadn’t seen it in a while, and he’d forgotten the way that it made her eyes shine, and two dimples poke in her cheeks. For a moment, the whole world faded around them, and for those wonderful seconds, it was just the two of them together, spinning around and getting lost in each other’s eyes. And then:

“Hiccup,” she whispered. “Your parents are watching.”

And then they kissed.

It was the first time they’d kissed properly since the reunion, and for a while, Hiccup melted into it, his fingers reaching for Astrid, cupping her cheek and pulling her closer. Her lips were as soft as he remembered, and his stomach roared, flipping over and over in a mixture of nervousness and delight. It was exactly as wonderful as he remembered, and it was everything he wanted in that moment.

The illusion shattered.

He’d done it again. He’d let himself get lost in a moment with her, a moment that could only ever be fake, a moment solely for the benefit of his parents. This wasn’t real. He was taking advantage of her, again. It had to stop.

He broke away from the kiss, backing away from her. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Sorry.”

People were starting to hover around the barn, having heard about the dance lessons and wanting to join in. In the corner of his eye, Hiccup could see Alvin, watching from the side, a twisted grin on his face. Astrid was watching him, blinking it surprise.

“Sorry,” he mumbled again.

Then he scarpered out of the barn and away.
The next day, Hiccup kept himself away from Astrid as much as possible.

When Val sent them out on an errand together, neither of them spoke. They walked in silence through the town, only talking when someone else spoke to them. It was hard to avoid the townspeople. The wedding had been the talk of the town for weeks, and people kept coming up to the two of them to ask about how it all going, and to talk about the night before.

“Wonderful dancing,” someone said, “you looked like you were enjoying yourselves.”

“Yes,” Hiccup said.

“We were,” Astrid said.

Neither of them mentioned the kiss.
Waking up next to Hiccup was becoming harder and harder.

Or at least, it would be if she ever actually woke up next to Hiccup. Nine times out of ten, Astrid would pretend to be asleep while she listened to Hiccup slink slowly out of bed each morning. She’d hear the clunk of metal against floor as he put his prosthetic against the floor, and there would always be a moment where he stopped, and everything would go silent, while he looked over at her to check that she hadn’t woken up. Then she’d hear him wander over towards his suitcase to pull out something to wear. Most of the time when she’d open her eyes and pretend to wake up, he’d be doodling at his desk, or just sitting at his chair.

The worst thing about it was that she had really begun to enjoy his close company; sometimes she would wake in the middle of the night to find that Hiccup’s arms had slipped around her waist and he’d pulled her close, their limbs tangled together. On those occasions, she’d almost do her best to try and keep herself awake, it was so nice to just lie there together. Hiccup radiated heat, and it was all that she could do to stop herself from snuggling closer. But no matter how hard she tried to keep herself awake and enjoy the moment, she always succumbed to sleep, her eyes drooping shut, only to open again in the morning and find that, once again, Hiccup had vacated the bed.

“How long have you been awake?” she’d ask, as if she hadn’t been listening to his movements.

“Oh, not very long,” Hiccup always responded, even if he’d been out of bed for an hour or more. “I was getting restless.”

Astrid would bite her lip, remembering all the times in university when she’d had to forcefully drag him out of bed, listening to him whine, “five more minutes,” over and over again.

It carried on morning after morning, until one morning she hadn’t heard a peep from him, opened her eyes, and found that he wasn’t there at all. She sat up, wiped sleep out of her bleary eyes and dimly registered the alarm clock displaying 6:00am, and looking over the side of the bed to find Hiccup’s prosthetic missing. Astrid wrapped the blanket around herself, and stumbled down the stairs, finding Hiccup sitting out on the porch, letting Toothless nibble at his fingers.

“Howiccup?” she said, “what are you doing up so early?”

He fed her some mumbled excuse, and Astrid headed back upstairs.

She was fully prepared to get another hour or two of sleep, but when she tucked herself back into the bed, she couldn’t shut her mind off. She kept thinking about Hiccup, about the way he kept disappearing every morning, and the way he kept getting out of bed as soon as he woke up, almost as if-

-Almost as if he couldn’t stand being in bed with her.

Hiccup thought that she didn’t know what he was up to.

For their first few days on Berk, it had been like a holiday: she and Hiccup had visited the beach, the pool, all the sites the little island had to offer, and for a while, it had been amazing. Hiccup was
loosening up in a way he hadn’t done for so long, and it was so lovely to see. He was smiling so much more, smiling at her, and it was wonderful in so many ways to see her best friend happy.

Wedding preparations had thrown a spanner in the works.

It was like someone had flicked a switch in Hiccup’s brain, and suddenly all he wanted to do was run around on errand after errand, promising Val they’d do anything she asked of them, even if he and Astrid had already made plans to do something together. Their once relaxing holiday now had them on their feet every single day, while Hiccup whisked Astrid around on job after job.

And that was fine, it really was fine, because this was his parents wedding, and of course he’d want it to go well. She had no assumptions that she wasn’t going to pull her weight, and she was happy to do so. She’d basically just been invited on a free holiday - there was no way in hell that she wasn’t going to help out.

But then… there was something about the way Hiccup was keeping them busy, getting so sucked into a job that he didn’t want to talk to her, having them do errand after errand after errand so they never got any time alone, flopping down exhausted on the bed at night and then sneaking out in the morning before she woke up. He’d always had time for her, he’d always wanted to talk, he’d always wanted to be around her; but now, it was like he couldn’t bear to be in the same room.

It took a week before she grew tired of it.

They’d been sent out to the barn to put some decorations up, and somehow, Astrid had found herself on a stepladder, pinning silk to the rafters while Hiccup watched her, as gormless as ever, his arms hanging uselessly at his side. She clenched her teeth around the pins sticking in her mouth - a part of her thinking that she’d really like to stick pins in him - and kept going, the desire to be helpful winning out over the desire to throw the towel in.

Down below, she felt Hiccup’s eyes leave her, and then she heard him talking to someone else. Even from up high she could hear the change in his voice, and could tell that he didn’t want to be talking to whoever it was. Curiosity piqued, she turned around to see who it was, the ladder wobbling underneath her.

Bad idea.

No sooner had she turned was she falling through the air, toppling down and smacking into a pile of hay. She swore as pain spread through her leg and up her back, and she squeezed her eyes shut, her hands balling into fists.

“Astrid!”

She could hear him rushing over, and resisted the urge to scream. She knew that he’d be there, hand out, eyes filling with concern, and right now, the last thing she wanted was Hiccup to be nice to her.

“Don’t touch me, Haddock,” she hissed, and slapped his hand away.

She hadn’t seen Hiccup’s mother enter the barn, but the next thing she registered was Val pulling her to her feet, and helping her walk back outside.

“Honestly, Hiccup, why weren’t you watching the ladder?” Val had chastised as they passed him, and Astrid couldn’t help but feel a strange, mean-spirited kind of satisfaction when she saw the look of guilt pass across Hiccup’s face.

Val kept propping her up the whole walk home, one arm firmly behind her back to keep her
“Really, Val, I’m fine,” Astrid said, watching as Val attempted to find her keys with one hand and hold Astrid up with the other. Astrid shrugged out of the embrace, proving she could walk on her own. “I’ll have a couple of bruises tomorrow, but I didn’t really fall that far. The hay broke my fall.”

“You sure?” Val said, holding up both her hands as if Astrid might fall again.

“Positive.”

“That’s a relief,” Val said, breaking out into a full smile, finally able to find her keys and let them into the house. When they were inside, Val regarded Astrid with a look she couldn’t decipher, before saying, “let’s have drinks on the patio, I’ve been meaning to get some time alone with my son’s girlfriend.”

A pit formed in Astrid’s stomach. She’d long since stopped being afraid of Hiccup’s mother after the few moments they had talked at the reunion. The image she’d had of Val as this imposing woman with eyes that bored into the back of your skull and saw all your secrets had completely faded away now, and she blamed that image entirely on Hiccup. The number of stories he had told her parents had twisted her view of them, but now she couldn’t place these sweet, kind-eyed people in the stories he’d spun.

And yet, there was something about being with Hiccup’s parents that made her uncomfortable. The constant scrutiny from them - even when it was affectionate - felt heavy and too much to bear. The guilt was already too much to handle, it had made its forever home in her stomach, and it wasn’t going to leave any time soon. She didn’t want to think about how Hiccup was going to tell them the truth.

She shuffled behind Val into the kitchen, taking the jug of squash that was offered to her, and followed her outside onto deck. Val dropped into a seat, and patted the one next to her. Astrid sunk down into the seat, putting the jug of squash on the table next to her.

“Sorry about today,” Val said. “There’s no reason why you should’ve been up on that stepladder. Honestly, I would’ve thought Hiccup would’ve found someone else-”

Astrid waved a hand in front of her face. “It’s fine,” she said, quickly. “I was happy to do it. Just wasn’t careful enough.”

“You shouldn’t have been doing that much,” Val said. “Take a break for the next few days. Hiccup’s been working you to the bone.”

“He just wants everything perfect for your wedding,” Astrid said, tapping her fingers against the glass of squash, “you know Hiccup. Won’t stop until the job’s done, and done properly.”

Val sighed. “Yes, I know my son. Was rather hoping that he’d tell me to shove off and choose to spend the time alone with you.”

“Me too,” Astrid said without thinking. Then she blinked, and started gabbling, “sorry, that’s not what I meant, I thought that you-”

Val tipped her head back and laughed, and as she did, Astrid couldn’t help but notice that her eyes crinkled just the same way Hiccup’s did when he laughed. “Sorry,” Val said, composing herself. “It’s just, in that moment, you sounded exactly like Hiccup.”

“Oh,” Astrid said, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “I guess I did.”
“You’re so like him,” Val said. Astrid could feel her gaze hot on her, and she found herself staring straight into her lap. “And so not like him, at the same time.”

“I am?” Astrid braved a look up at the other woman. She was looking down at her with an intense expression that made Astrid look away again.

“You are,” Val said. “You’d make such a good Haddock.”

Astrid eyes bugged, and she spluttered, barely able to make her next sentence out, “well, I mean, I’m not sure that’s on the cards yet—”

Val laughed again. “Not now, my girl, not now,” she said, “but one day soon. I know my son, and I know how he strongly he feels about you.”

Then why won’t he look at me?

Astrid had to bite her tongue to stop herself from saying it. Instead she nodded and smiled, and was reminded again that Hiccup was a really good actor, he must be, because he’d managed to fool his own parents.

Up above them, the sky crackled.

Val’s eyes shot upwards, and she gave another sigh. “Honestly, English weather is so unpredictable, we better get inside before it gets too wet…”

Back up in the safety of Hiccup’s room, Astrid watched from the window as torrent of rain fell from the sky. Hiccup still hadn’t come home.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, not really.

He came in hours after her talk with Val, dripping wet, and serious looking. Astrid’s bad mood had dissipated, something that was do with getting some alone time, listening to the rain while she read a book. She smiled at him, apologised for snapping, convinced that she’d made up all of her grievances with Hiccup in her own head, until those words came:

“I think I’ll sleep on the sofa tonight.”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise, not with the way that he had been sneaking out of bed early morning, not with the way that he’d been finding excuses not to talk to her, and yet, it still stung just as badly as it would have done had it been news to her.

She watched him stutter and stumble over his words, refusing to look at her while he made up excuses. Then he fled, leaving Astrid alone in his bed.

That night, she didn’t sleep a wink. Hiccup’s bed, which had at point been wonderfully comfortable and deliciously warm, was now stark cold. No matter what position she crawled into, she couldn’t get herself to rest easy, her mind running a mile a minute.

Oh, what had she done to make him avoid her so?
He was almost normal around his parents.

She knew his game; knew that he was trying to keep the facade around his parents only to snub her when they were alone, and she knew that she shouldn’t buy into it, shouldn’t let herself believe the lie but, god, she had missed her best friend so much. She’d resolved to play Hiccup’s game back at him until the wedding was over - not too much, she liked Hiccup’s parents too much to spoil it for them - but, god damn it, if he was going to be distant, she could be distant too.

But, when all was said and done, she found that she simply couldn’t pretend that she didn’t like him. When he’d make a joke to his parents, when he’d do that stupid squeaky voice of his to protest something they’d said, when his eyes crinkled when he laughed, she couldn’t help but feel somehow lighter, and she’d laugh along too. Then she’d feel angry about it, like her body was betraying her.

She’d been mulling all this over while she loaded all manner of cutlery and plates into a large crate, piling up crate after crate with such force they rattled as she plonked them into their place. She was almost done, and was about to turn and leave, when there was a brush of metal across her skin.

Astrid turned and saw Alvin standing over her, his trademark twisted smile on his face.

“Miss Hofferson, I believe?” he said, and held out his hand.

She remembered Alvin from the wedding, and she’d seen him hanging around Berk, always in some corner, watching everything that was going on from under his dark eyes. He had the kind of demeanour that left a bad taste in the mouth, and the feeling that you needed to take a shower after talking to him.

Astrid took his hand tentatively, keeping her eyes warily on the hook. “That’s me.”

His hand was cold and clammy, and she instinctively shrunk back from him. He wasn’t an attractive man, what with the pale sunken skin, and unkind eyes. He had a hat jammed onto his head, and was clearly balding underneath, despite sporting a dark, wispy moustache and scraggily goatee.

“I hope you’re enjoying your time on Berk,” he said, “although, if I were you, I would be doing everything I could to get out by now.”

Astrid stilled. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’m talking about Hiccup.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “What about him?”

“It’s obvious he can’t stand this,” Alvin drawled. “I bet he can’t wait until all of this over.”

“Well, weddings are stressful.”

“Even more stressful,” he said, “when you have to pretend to be in love with a girl you can’t stand.”

It was like a punch to the gut. Astrid frowned and said, “what?” her voice much lower than before.

“He’s keeping himself so busy so that he doesn’t have to spend time with you alone,” he said, a nasty glint in his eye. “He leaves the room when you walk in. You should see the faces he makes
behind your back.”

“I don’t believe you,” Astrid said, sharply. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t he?”

“We’ve been friends for ages,” she said, taking a step back from him. “Why would he decide now that he can’t stand me?”

“I think you know why,” he said.

“No,” Astrid said, her lip curling. “I don’t. And why should I listen to you, anyway? You’ve been trying to mess with us since the beginning.”

Alvin shrugged. “There’s no reason. I’m just a poor, observant farmer telling it like I see it. It’s your choice whether or not you believe me.”

He swept out of the room, stopping at the entrance to turn back and look at her. “But I would have thought,” he said, “that a girl like you wouldn’t let herself get used by some guy.”

Then he left, while Astrid silently fumed.

How dare he?

How dare he think that he could come and mess with her and Hiccup’s friendship like that? She and Hiccup were fine. Sure, maybe things were a little awkward right now. Maybe this whole fake-relationship thing had made things a little uncomfortable. Yes, Hiccup was leaving the room when they were alone, and yes, he’d decided that he didn’t want to sleep in the same bed anymore, but that didn’t mean anything. They were still as good as they had ever been. Right?

For one glorious day, she was almost right.

Val had organised surprise dancing lessons. Surprise, Val had confided in Astrid, because there was no other way she’d be able to make Hiccup dance otherwise. She’d been right, if Hiccup’s protests were anything to go by. They’d practically had to drag him out of the house. Astrid was surprised that there weren’t skid marks on the floor where his shoes had been.

But once they were there in the barn, once they were dancing, it was almost back to normal, and it was wonderful. He was actually looking at her again, his eyes sparkling as they spun around the room, him stepping on her toes over and over again. He was cracking jokes again, he was clutching onto her for dear life, and he was smiling at her, and in that moment, Astrid felt like she’d got her best friend back. Her heart soared, and she couldn’t help but smile, looking straight at him, and thinking that, right then, she wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else.

Astrid didn’t know what made her do it.

Maybe it was the thrill of being under lights, music blaring loudly around them, or perhaps, it was her way of sticking it to Alvin – he was wrong, he was so utterly wrong – or maybe, just maybe, she wanted to see what would happen if she did.

As the dance slowed, and the music faded, Astrid’s fingers curled around his, their eyes locked in each other.

“Hiccup,” she whispered. “Your parents are watching.” She leaned in and kissed him.
It was just like every other time, warm, soft and comfortable, just like Hiccup himself. He froze like he always did every time she’d initiated contact, but this time, he recovered quickly, and she could feel his fingers cupping her cheek, pulling her closer. Her lips buzzed, her heart thumped, and it was something, finally something, and then, just as she was losing all sense of herself, Hiccup pushed her away. “Hiccup?” she mumbled, her eyes snapping back open.

His green eyes, once soft, now had shame reflecting in them, and he backed away from her further, almost bumping into the wall behind him. “Sorry,” he said, and Astrid felt bile rising in her throat at the way his voice was filled with so much pity. “Sorry,” he said again, and then turned, tripping over himself to get away from her, mumbling apologies as he ran.

Astrid was left standing frozen, watching as Hiccup disappeared in the crowd of people that had come flooding into the barn.

At the side, Alvin caught her eye, a nasty grin etched upon his face.

Astrid swung an axe at a log and screamed. When she was young, long before her family had moved to the city, long before her father had ditched her mother at the altar, Astrid and her parents had lived out in the countryside. Astrid’s mother, wonderful warrior woman that she was, had taken to chopping her own firewood rather than buying it from the local store, and little Astrid would dance around the stump and watch her.

“She’s far too young!” – but Astrid’s mother was careful, and taught her daughter well. In later years, Astrid would think it was a miracle that she’d never managed to chop her own arm off.

When Astrid was thirteen and watching her mother go from warrior woman to shattered broken pieces, she’d run out into the woods in her bridesmaid dress and taken the axe with her, chopping logs into splinters until her hands had blisters from gripping the axe to tight.

After Hiccup left her in the crowd, Astrid ran from the barn, finding her way to the woods where Gobber had been chopping wood as decoration for the wedding.

Astrid had offered to help, but Gobber had refused. “No, no,” he said. “I just need you to wheel it back to the barn. Don’t want any casualties!”

The axe was right where he’d left it, and before she’d even realised what she was doing, she picked it up and slammed it back down into the wood, over and over and over again.

There was a tightness in her chest that just wouldn’t leave, an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach, because Alvin had been right.

She remembered Hiccup’s nickname for the man - Alvin the Treacherous - she knew that he was trying to stir the pot, trying to cause drama.

But pot-stirrer or otherwise, it didn’t mean that there wasn’t truth to what he’d been saying. Hiccup had been avoiding her. He’d been ignoring her. He’d acted like he’d been burned after their kiss, and since then, he’d disappeared. Liar or not, he’d only been saying things that had already been there in her own head, and she couldn’t deny the facts.

Astrid kept chopping wood until her arm ached, and clouds had begun to draw overhead. As the
first drops of rain began to fall, she made her way back to the house, dreading the idea that she’d have to watch Hiccup shrink away and avoid her for the rest of the trip. She slunk through the front door just as the torrential downpour let loose.

She’d been planning to duck her head and scramble straight to her room, ready to hide away for as long as necessary, but before she could even make the stairs, someone had put their hand on her shoulder.

She stilled, cursed her stars for dragging her luck through the mud, and looked up to see Stoick looking down at her. She plastered a fake smile on herself which she suspected looked more like a grimace, but it seemed to pass muster, as Stoick beamed back.

“Where did you run off to?” he said, “you and Hiccup disappeared. Trying to get some alone time?”

He nudged her and winked, and Astrid pressed her lips together in a tense half-smile.

“Where’s the boy now, I wonder?” Stoick said, but he didn’t seem to be looking for an answer, because he kept talking. “Ah, he’s probably off pouting because we made him dance, eh? Good thing too – I wanted to speak to you alone.”

Astrid’s heart sank. “Mr. Haddock, I-”

“Call me Stoick, Astrid, we’re familiar enough now, aren’t we?” he said, and his good-natured smile made her want to cry.

“Sorry, Stoick, it’s just that I was just-” Astrid began, and then trailed off, as a dozen excuses sprung to her lips, none sounding even a little bit plausible.

Hiccup’s father didn’t give her a chance to pick one, clapping his hand down on her shoulder. “This won’t take long, Astrid, I just wanted to talk a little bit about you and my son, no need to look so worried.”

If only you really knew about me and your son, Astrid thought to herself, but didn’t say anything, letting herself be lead into the kitchen and dropping down onto one of the chairs that Stoick had offered her way.

“I have to tell you, I have never met a more well-spoken, smart, capable woman of your age before,” he began.

Astrid shifted in her a seat, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Oh. Well, thank you, Stoick,” she mumbled, staring down at her lap.

“I mean it from the bottom of my heart when I say that I couldn’t think of anyone better for my son,” he said.

“Oh,” Astrid said, and found that she couldn’t say anything more, because if she did, her voice would shake, and she’d give the whole game away.

“I know Val’s said a few things to you, but I want to let you know,” Stoick said, “you’re a Haddock through and through. I already consider you part of the family.”

Astrid’s throat was closing up, and there was a pang in her chest that was almost too painful to bear.

“Just wanted to let you know that,” Stoick said. “You’re one of us now, Astrid.”
He squeezed her shoulder, and left the room, leaving Astrid alone to sit there, frozen in shock.

She gave it one last sad, sorry try.

The next morning, when Hiccup had finally emerged form wherever he’d disappeared to, she got nothing but a thin-lipped smile from him, and a nod.

“You alright?” he asked at breakfast.

*No. I’m far from alright.*

“Fine,” she said, munching on a bowl of cereal.

*Come on, Hiccup, she urged in her head, talk to me. Prove me wrong.*

But he didn’t.

He didn’t talk for the rest of breakfast, staring straight down at his food, his eyes not even flickering up at her.

“...Are you alright?” she asked, silently pleading for him to say something, do *anything* to give her a sign that her suspicions weren’t true.

Hiccup shrugged. “Fine,” he said. “Everything’s fine.”

No mention of the kiss. Nothing about the way he was acting. Nothing about anything.

Astrid had to force herself not scream in frustration.

There was a point in her life when she could look into Hiccup’s green eyes and tell exactly what he was thinking.

Now she looked into them and saw nothing.

He didn’t say much else on their walk into town. Nor did he say anything to her in town as they ran errand after errand, even when people seemed to want to do nothing but talk a mile a minute to them.

And he didn’t say anything at all on their long walk home, he just stared down at his feet the whole journey.

Before they’d even made it back to the house, Astrid had made up their mind. As soon as they got to the front door, Hiccup had disappeared somewhere into the house, continuing with his let’s-be-anywhere-but-here theme. That suited Astrid just fine. She climbed up the stairs almost in a daze, entered Hiccup’s room and pulled out her bags from where they’d been stashed in a corner, dragging them out into the middle of the room and opening them up. Her hands shook a little as she moved, trying to hold her breath and keep herself from getting too worked up.

She was kneeling in front of them and filling them up with her stuff when Hiccup came in the room.

She barely looked up at him.
“I can’t do this anymore,” she said.

When Hiccup was nine years old, he fell over the top of the handlebars of his bicycle.

There was a moment when the wheel got stuck on a stone, he pushed hard on the brakes and he flew, straight over the top. Years later, he still remembered the feeling of his stomach turning upside down, the anticipation of the concrete coming towards him, the feeling like he’d had all the air knocked out of him as he smacked onto the ground, a crying mess.

Seeing Astrid in his room, hair bursting out of her braid as she scrabbled through her suitcases and bags at her feet, lips pursed into a straight line, made the whole feeling come rushing back again.

“What?” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she repeated, the words ringing in his head like a siren. “I’m leaving.”

“Why?”

Astrid shook her head, no words coming to her. She looked like she was fighting off the urge to cry. “I can’t. I just can’t do this anymore.”

Hiccup took a step forward, his hand reaching out for her, his brain begging his mouth to do something, to say anything, anything that would make her change her mind.

“Please don’t leave,” he said, his heart thumping in his throat.

“I have to,” Astrid said. She turned her back to him, yanking open another one of her bags and dumping clothes into it. “I have to go right now.”

His brain and his body finally caught up to each other and he ran over to her, his hand gently catching her wrist. “At least tell me what’s wrong. Did something happen at home? Did someone-?”

“Oh, come on, Hiccup,” Astrid said as she snatched her hand away from him. She went back to shoving things in the bag. “You are not this dense.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Astrid sighed, raising her eyes to the heavens. “You.”

He’d seen it coming, but it still stung like nothing else. He froze.

“Why?” His voice had gone again.

“I feel like your prop,” Astrid said, her hands curling into fists. “I don’t know what I’m doing here anymore.”

“Just a few more days-”

“Bullshit!” she snapped, kicking at the bed. The bag on toppled onto the floor, and Astrid’s freshly packed clothes spilled out. She scowled and dropped to her knees, refolding clothes and shoving them back in. “Val’s been making hints about us getting married. Stoick’s practically inducted me into the family already. Have you ever thought about how you’re going end this? Tell them that it’s all a lie? Were you really going to break their hearts like that? Or were you going to
drag this out even longer still?”

Hiccup reached out a hand to touch hers, but she yanked it away. “Astrid, I—”

“This was supposed to be for a day, Hiccup,” she said, sighing and letting her head flop onto the bag. “One day.”

“I know. I thought… I thought you didn’t mind,” he said, weakly.

“I didn’t mind!” Astrid said. “I didn’t. I didn’t care when it was just you and me goofing off and hanging out like always. But it’s made it so awkward. You don’t even want to look at me, anymore. You’re not even looking at me now!”

Hiccup’s eyes had slid down towards his feet, too scared to look her in the eye. He forced himself to look at her. She was frowning.

“I thought maybe you were just finding this a little weird, and that’s why you were pushing me away,” she said, “but then Alvin said—”

“Alvin!” Hiccup cut in. “Astrid, you don’t want to listen to anything he says! He just likes to stir up trouble, he’s not—”

But his voice faded away, his teeth worrying at his lower lip. Hadn’t he done the same? Hadn’t he listened to Alvin?

“I know,” Astrid said, firmly. She pulled herself to her feet and took a few steps closer to Hiccup. “At first, I thought the same, but then everything he was saying started to make sense. You don’t look at me. You leave the room when we’re alone. You barely say two words to me when we’re not around someone else. It’s like we’re not even friends anymore.”

Hiccup felt as if someone had just dumped an ice cold bucket of water over his head. “That’s not true.”

“I feel like I’m an object to make your parents proud of you.”

“Astrid,” Hiccup said, his voice cracking, eyes watering. “You’ve got this all wrong—”

“But have I?” she said sharply, her head snapping up to look at him. “So I’m not just here to make your parents like you? Wasn’t that the whole point of this?”

“Well, I—”

“And you’re so wrong anyway, because your parents love you. They love everything about you, you’re just too fucking stubborn to see that,” she said, her teeth gritted.

“That’s not fair,” Hiccup said, his voice low. “You haven’t been around them as much as I have to see—”

“I’ve been around them enough!” she snapped. “Anyone who’s spent any time with them knows that they think the world of you.”

Hiccup stared at the floor, his fingers curling around his trouser material. “You don’t know—”

“I’m just here for you to kiss and cuddle and make a show of in front of your parents, and you can’t even stand to look at me,” she said, hitting him on the arm and pulling him to face her.

“That’s not true,” Hiccup said again. “Please. Stay. It’s just for a few more days, I promise. Then
“you go back home, back to work—”

“Hiccup, I lost my job.”

Silence. Hiccup just stared at her, his mouth opening and closing.

He finally managed a very quiet, “what?”

“When I asked my manager for the two weeks off, they told me that if I left, there wouldn’t be a job waiting for me when I got back,” she said quietly, staring down at her fingers.

He stared at her, wide-eyed. “Why did you…?”

“Because you’re my best friend, Hiccup!” she said, her hands balling into fists again. “Because you were so relieved to have a solution to your problem, and when I said I’d do it, your eyes lit up and you looked so happy, and I figured that job wasn’t what I wanted to do forever, right? I’d find another job, and it’d be worth it just to spend the time with you, but oh God, I was so stupid, because now you can’t even be in the same room as me!”

She was practically bellowing by the time she was finished. Hiccup was too stunned to move, or say anything.

Astrid sighed, her voice much quieter when she spoke again, “this was never going to end.”

Hiccup took a step forward. “Astrid, I—”

“When I kissed you,” she said, her voice shaking, “it was like you couldn’t get away fast enough. Did it not mean anything to you?”

Tears sprung in Hiccup’s eyes. “It meant everything.”

Astrid just shook her head.

“I can’t be here anymore,” she said, with a soft, resigned sigh. “I just really, really want to go home.”

“Please don’t leave,” Hiccup said again, his voice hoarse, tears leaking down his cheeks. “Please.”

“What do you even want, Hiccup?” Astrid said.

“You.”

He forced himself to look straight at her, the admission burning in the air. For a moment, something flickered in Astrid’s eyes, and her expression softened, but then it was gone, almost as quickly as it had been there.

“It’s too late,” Astrid said, heaving her bags onto her shoulder, lifting up the suitcase with her other hand and heading towards the door.

“You know what the saddest thing is?” she said, one foot inside the door, one foot out.

Hiccup didn’t say anything, he just stared at her.

“Back before the reunion, if you had asked me to be your girlfriend for real,” she said, her fingers curling around the door handle. “I would have said yes.”

Then she headed out the door, slamming it behind her. Hiccup was left listening to the sound of
her suitcase thumping down the stairs.
“I would have said yes.”

After she’d slammed Hiccup’s door behind her, she hauled her luggage out on the ceiling, slinging two bags over her shoulder and dragging her suitcases behind her. Once the door had closed properly, her throat closed up and she bit the inside of her cheek, hovering for a moment out in the hallway. She wasn’t going to cry over this. She wasn’t. She hauled her suitcases down the stairs, making sure they thumped loudly with every step, knowing that Hiccup could hear everything from his room. Good.

If she could just make it out the door, she could get herself to the airport and then she could leave. The ticket Stoick and Val had given her was open-ended, so she could leave whenever she liked - possibly, she thought, with a pang in her heart, so that they could persuade her to stay longer, but right now, Astrid did not want to spend any more time than necessary on this island.

It wasn’t that it was a bad place; on the contrary, it was a wonderful place. It was just Hiccup’s place. Over the past week, he’d taken her all over, shown her everything, told her so many stories about his childhood that she couldn’t even look at a tree without thinking about him. Everything on this island had some sort of stupid sentimental value to him, and she needed to get out, now.

It wasn’t until she’d hauled all of her stuff out onto the front porch that she realised she had a problem.

Her plan to get away was all well and good, except for the fact that she was now waylaid down with bags, ready to go to the airport with absolutely no way of getting there. She kicked her suitcase in frustration, her hands carding through her hair as she tried to think of a solution. Eventually, she pulled her stuff back into her arms again, ready to set off down the road. Whatever she was going to do, she was going to do it away from the Haddock porch. Every minute that she stood there was another minute that someone would see her like this or Hiccup would come down from his room to try and stop her: the last thing she needed right now was more of that.

All she had to do was get out of there without anyone noticing.

“Astrid, are you alright?”

She resisted the urge to scream. Why did Stoick have to choose now to appear across the lane and wander into the driveway?

“Fine, sir,” Astrid said, her voice wobbling. “I just need to go home.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to just call me Stoick?” he said. His tone was affectionate, and there was a softness to his eyes that made Astrid want to punch something.

Hiccup had told her over and over again that his father was a cold man, an unforgiving man, that he was critical to a fault and that nothing would ever be good enough for him, but Astrid had seen none of this. All she had seen was man that loved his family and his community, and nothing of the man Hiccup had spoken of, and right now, she wished he’d been right.

She didn’t need someone to be nice to her right now.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, ducking her head and setting off down the road, pulling her suitcases
behind her. “I need to go.”

“Astrid wait—” he flung out an arm and took her by the shoulder— “did something happen at home?”

She shook her head. “No. I just… need to go home.”

“Did something happen here?”

Astrid paused for barely a second before shaking her head and saying no again, but it was long enough for Stoick to catch on. His brow furrowed, his lips pressed into a straight line, his voice low as he said, “was it Hiccup? Did he do something?”

“No,” Astrid said, backing away even more. “I don’t want to cause any trouble. I just want to leave.”

“You’re no trouble to me, Astrid, or to any of our family,” Stoick said. “You’re one of us now.”

“No, I’m not,” she said, her voice sharper than a knife.

Hiccup’s father blinked, looking rather taken aback, and the guilt flooded through her body faster than a flicker.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, pulling her suitcases back up off the floor and making off down the road. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

“Astrid, wait!” Stoick said, putting two hands on her shoulders and pulling back towards him. “At least tell me what’s going on. Maybe there’s something I can do to help you.”

“I shouldn’t have come,” she gulped. “It was a bad idea. I should have said no.”

“Nonsense,” Stoick said. “We’ve loved having you here, and if Hiccup’s done something, I’m sure you can work it out, he’s not always the best at-“

“We can’t,” Astrid said, her voice taking on that sharp tone again. “I’m sorry. It’s… we can’t work it out. Not this time.”

Stoick softened his brow. “At least let me drive you to the airport, Astrid. Please. I want to make sure that you get there okay.”

There was a pause while Astrid took a deep breath in. “Okay,” she finally mumbled. “Okay.”

She watched, hand clutching her other arm, as Stoick hauled her suitcases into the back of the car, and numbly went to sit in the front seat, her hands shaking a little as she buckled herself in.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Stoick offered, a few minutes into their journey.

Astrid shook her head. Her throat was raw, and there was a dull pain behind her eyes. There were still hours and hours of travel time left, and all she really wanted was to get home, curl herself up in bed, and sleep the rest of the summer away.

“Sorry,” she said, her voice very small. “I can’t.”

There was another long pause.

“You should know that my son thinks the world of you,” Stoick said. “I can see it whenever he looks at you. You’re very special to him.”
Astrid swallowed the lump in her throat. “He’s never said that.”

“Haddock men were never good with their words,” he said. “But you should know that you mean everything to him. I’d give you my word on that.”

Astrid closed her eyes, her fingernails screwing into her palms. “I’m sorry,” she said, quietly. “It’s not enough.”

After the door slammed and he was left with the sound of her suitcase thumping down the stairs, Hiccup stumbled back, knocking into the bed behind him and falling into a heap amongst his sheets. The world had seemed to slow down around him, five words spinning around his head over and over again - *I would have said yes, I would have said yes, I would have said yes* - five utterly damning words that solidified how much he’d messed up. He’d been so close, he’d scraped the surface of having everything that he wanted, and now it was so far from his grasp, he’d never be able to keep it again, and it was all his fault.

He sat catatonic on the bed, staring straight at the space where Astrid Hofferson had been. A part of his brain told him to get up, to follow her out down the stairs into the street and make her stay; but she’d said that she’d wanted to go, and he was not going to disrespect a woman’s wishes. Not now. Instead he sat still on the bed, hands quivering.

He didn’t realise he was crying until his mother burst into the room. “Hiccup, I just saw—” she spotted him on the bed— “Hiccup, are you okay?”

She ran forward, dropping onto the bed to pull him into a hug, and Hiccup didn’t say anything, he just wrapped his arms around Val and held on tight. “Hiccup?” Val said, her voice laced with concern. “What’s going on?”

“I messed up,” Hiccup said. “She’s gone.”

“Astrid?”

Hiccup nodded.

“What happened?”

He bent his head and sighed, and began to tell his mother the story. Not the full story - even now he couldn’t bring himself to tell his mother that he’d lied to her - *coward*, a voice whispered in his head - so he told her the edited version, the version where he’d pushed her away and she’d finally reached a breaking point. It was only now that he’d lost her that he realised just how much he cared about her, and as he explained that to his mother, he realised just how much it was true. There was an ache in his heart and a twist in his stomach, the depth of the mistake he’d made slowly killing him on the inside: he’d had Astrid, and he’d lost her.

“Hiccup,” Val began, her eyes turning very serious indeed, “if you feel this strongly about her, why aren’t you going after her?”

“She doesn’t want me to,” Hiccup said. “I’m not going to make it worse for her or me. I need to just let her go.”

“Absolutely not!” Val said with such force that Hiccup was quite taken a back. She grabbed a hold of Hiccup’s shoulders, forcing him to look her in the eye. “You’re telling yourself this
because you’re worried that it’s going to go wrong again. You’re worried that it can’t be fixed.”

“Well, yes, obviously,” Hiccup said, somewhat dry.

“What if this is what she needs? What if she needs you to go after her and prove how you feel?” Val said, the urgency in her voice growing stronger with each word.

“And if it goes badly?”

“To hell with it, Hiccup!” Val was practically shouting at this point, and Hiccup found himself edging away from her off the bed. “You can’t go through life worrying about how things might be go wrong. Do you love this girl, Hiccup?”

“Yes,” he said firmly, without any hesitation.

“Are you willing to do anything for her?”

Again, the answer to the question was easy. “Yes.”

Val took her car keys out of her pocket and placed them into his hand. “Then go get her.”

His mother’s rousing speech had been enough for Hiccup to get his ass out of his room, downstairs and onto the driveway, and if it hadn’t, the look in Val’s eyes would have been enough. There was a spark in her eyes, a fire that he’d never seen before blazing brightly, a look that spurred him to run and not look back.

He barely noticed that his father’s car wasn’t on the drive, he just sped into the other car, and by the time he turned the ignition, he’d made his mind up. It was time to stop all of this nonsense. No more moping around and acting as if he knew best about someone else’s feelings. He was going to go to the airport, he was going to find Astrid, he was going to tell her how he really felt, and hopefully she’d reciprocate. He didn’t give himself the time to entertain the notion that she might not.

The tires screeched as he raced out of the driveway and down the road, pressing on the gas to get him out of there as quick as possible.

He had not accounted for the traffic.

For some inexplicable reason, the sleepy Isle of Berk, whose rush hour would have been considered dead quiet in any of the major cities on the mainland, was horribly gridlocked. In that moment, Hiccup remembered with a frown, that there was a festival happening on the beach that day. He and Astrid had talked about going, back when everything wasn’t so screwed up. Unfortunately, it made for very busy roads.

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“Come on,” Hiccup grumbled, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel as he watched the car in front of him inch a few feet and then stop again. “Come on, come on, come on.”

He had to reach her before she went into security. After that it was game over.

He sat in the traffic, growing steadily more agitated, until eventually it all cleared up, and he was racing around the lanes and a pace much higher than the speed limit. The car had barely parked in the airport car park before Hiccup was flinging the door open and heading out towards the building.
He flew through the revolving doors and stood there breathing heavily and scanning the whole of the room to see if he could get a glimpse of blonde hair.

Nothing.

He did a loop around the whole place, looking in the cafe and stopping by the check-in desks to ask if anyone had seen her. He didn’t get a good response until the last desk he checked.

“A Miss Hofferson?” the woman said, typing a few words into the computer. “Ah, yes, it says right here that she already checked in.”

Hiccup barely remembered to say thank you as he stumbled away from the counter, the world imploding again and the dark clouds coming over.

He was too late. She was gone.

“Goddamn it,” he mumbled, ignoring the dirty looks he was getting from the passers-by and plopping himself down on a nearby bench, carding his hands through his hair. “Goddamn it.”

This was it. He’d blown all of his chances.

The world continued on around him, people passing by without a clue that he was falling apart. Hiccup sank back into the chair and sighed, resigned as he looked over at security, his leg bouncing. Astrid was over there somewhere, getting ready to get on a plane to get away from him.

There were only a few walls between them, and Hiccup thought miserably to himself about the irony of being so close and yet being so far away.

All it was were walls and doors, barely an obstacle if it wasn’t for security, and there was no way Hiccup would get through there.

Unless...

His mother’s words were still swimming through his head - “are you willing to do anything for her?” - and along the way an old movie he’d seen a hundred times came to mind.

He got to his feet, his eyes flickering around the room, looking at over at check in, and then over towards security.

It was time to do something stupid.

Before his brain could tell him no, Hiccup set off running, slipping through the security while the guards were distracted. The metal detector beeped as he ran through, but he ignored it and kept running, setting forward through the airport corridors. There were people yelling furiously behind him, and he was all too aware that they’d given chase, but in that moment, he didn’t care. This was his Love, Actually moment, this was his gigantic romantic gesture. He was Romeo, Astrid was Juliet, he was Darcy and she was Elizabeth, he was Gilbert Blythe and she was Anne Shirley, and they were meant to be, they were romantic heroes, and he was going to prove to her how much he loved her.

He leapt over barriers, he followed corridors and hallways and went through back entrances to lose the airport staff after him and found a rather bewildered woman behind a counter.

“The plane to the mainland,” Hiccup wheezed, breathing heavily in and out as he spoke. “What gate is it?”

The woman blinked. “The last plane to the mainland has already departed.”
“What?” Hiccup said, looking up at her in horror.

And then he felt two strong hands grab him by the shoulder and pull his wrists behind his back.

The plane journey home was worse than Astrid thought it would be. Flying first class was the last thing she wanted to do; all it did was remind Astrid of *him*. First class reminded her of his parent's house, marble floors and arches, perfect posh voices, perfect, perfect people. All she could think about was the last journey she had taken first class - with Hiccup by her side, the two of them laughing and making jokes about white wine and caviar, fussing over Toothless in his little pet carrier.

Now, the silence in her little compartment was deafening. She’d found herself wishing for any sort of company, and yet when the flight attendant had come back to check on her saying, “is there anything I can do for you?” with a fake falsetto voice and a false smile, Astrid had wanted to scream.

Stupid first class.

She passed the time shredding the safety leaflet to pieces, leaving the mess all over the fold out table. When the air hostess had come back again, she had pursed her lips at the sight, but hadn't said anything. Astrid noticed that she had been the same one to attend them on their first slight out, the one who had been laughing at all of Astrid's sly comments about first class - the one who'd thought her movie star impression was hilarious, and it was like the universe was playing some silly trick on her. The woman kept looking at Astrid pityingly, like she knew that she'd been broken up with.

God, she hadn't even been *broken* up with. She and Hiccup had never really been together.

It felt like she'd been broken up with.

It was the same feeling as all those other times, with all those other guys whose faces she only sort of remembered, all paling in comparison to Hiccup. The same angry feeling in her throat, like she was stopping herself from crying. The same hot feeling in her brain, like she wanted hunch her shoulders and duck her head. The same horrible twisted feeling in her stomach, like something was really wrong.

The worst thing was that she couldn't even blame him all that much. What had he really done besides try to keep her feelings in mind? How was he supposed to know that the last thing she wanted was to just stay friends? She'd thought she was being *so obvious*, but apparently not. The anger burned in her chest, the humiliation hot on her face; she broken the Hofferson golden rule, through and through: don’t let a man get to you like this. And they never had before: breaks ups had passed Astrid by with little heartache; she’d never been particularly affected by anything a man had done.

But Hiccup, silly, sweet Hiccup, had wormed his way into her heart and made a home there, and for almost a fraction of a second, she’d been convinced that she was in Hiccup’s too.

Stupid, stupid Hiccup.

She'd got it wrong.

She clenched her hands into fists and unclenched them. The stewardess wandered down the aisle
again, and Astrid idly wondered what she'd do if she asked for a punching bag.

As much as she found herself longing for something to hurt, she instead found her solace in the complimentary alcohol that kept coming her way. The attendant kept the drink flowing without so much as a judging side glance, and for that, Astrid was grateful.

By the time the plane touched down on the mainland, Astrid was a wreck. Her head was a fog, the booze clouding her brain as she stumbled out the stairs and onto a runway, one of the stewardesses hot on her heels to make sure that she didn’t fall over.

After waiting woozily at the baggage claim to pick up her suitcases, Astrid found a bathroom and neatly threw up in one of the toilets.

Hiccup bent his head, his fingers running through his hair, his eyes squeezed shut.

The squat white room offered very little comfort to him; the bench he sat on was hard and cold, and he had to keep shifting around to find a comfortable spot, only for it to become unbearable a few seconds later.

He should have known that life wasn’t like the movies. He should have known that big romantic gestures don’t pan out in real life like they do on screen. And lord knows, he really, really should have known that jumping security in an airport was a terrible idea.

If only he’d been quicker on the mark, if only he’d made the decision to go after her sooner instead of moping around in his room, if only he’d done something else, he wouldn’t be sitting in a cold jail cell.

His father was going to kill him.
It was a long couple of nights in the county jail, and Hiccup hadn’t had a shower in as many days. He smelt distinctly like floor and BO, and he couldn’t help but feel sorry for his father, having to sit across from him on the ride home. It had been a long journey back to the house, and Stoick hadn’t said a word to Hiccup the whole way home. They’d spent the whole trip in stony silence, his father gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were turning white. Hiccup had spent the time with his forehead pressed against the window, staring out at the country outside. His expression hadn’t changed since Stoick had picked him up that morning.

When they got in the house, Stoick exploded.

“What were you thinking?” he said, drawing himself to full height, and Hiccup was painfully reminded of all those times his father had been called into school. “No, actually, don’t even answer that, there’s nothing you could say that could make this make sense.”

Hiccup gave him an answer anyway. “I was going after Astrid.”

“So, you ran through security?”

“It was my Love, Actually moment,” Hiccup mumbled, feebly. At the incredulous look on his father’s face, Hiccup lifted his chin, and squared his shoulders. “Mum said I should.”

As if by magic, Val appeared out of nowhere, her arms folded, her back against the door frame. Her mouth was pressed into a stern, thin, line. “I told you should go after her, not to jump security in airport,” she said. “I thought you had common sense, Hiccup.”

“You said I should fight for her,” Hiccup said.

“Not at the expense of the law, Hiccup, come on.”

Hiccup sighed, his last hope of his mother defending him gone. He shuffled past his father, head hung, towards the stairs.

“Where do you think you’re going?” his father growled.

“To bed.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Stoick said, grabbing Hiccup by the arm and pulling him into the living room, closing the door behind them. They heard a sigh, and footsteps as Val walked elsewhere.

Stoick turned on him. “What did you do, Hiccup? Why did Astrid want to leave so badly?”

“I just messed up, alright?”

His father frowned. “She was on the verge of tears when I took her to the airport, I think you did more than mess up.”

The guilt pierced Hiccup’s gut like a knife. “Thanks for the sympathy,” he muttered.

It was the wrong thing to say. Stoick’s expression – which had already been stormy – became thunderous.
“You think this a joke?” Stoick bellowed, and Hiccup shrunk back. “You think it’s funny that we had to bail you out of jail? Do you have any idea how this looks for us?”

The anger Hiccup had been swallowing bubbled to the surface, loud, unwelcome and burning in his chest. “Because everything is about how it looks for you, isn’t it?” he spat.

“Excuse me?”

“Extravagant reunions, over-the-top weddings. Everything just to say look-at-us, look at how perfect we are,” Hiccup said, his tongue like fire against his teeth.

“You can’t speak to me like this, Hiccup, just because your girlfriend—”

“—Astrid isn’t my girlfriend.”

Stoick arched an eyebrow. “Well, that much is clear.”

“No, I mean Astrid was never my girlfriend,” Hiccup snapped. “We were faking it.”

“You were what?”

“Didn’t you wonder why I never mentioned her before the reunion?” he said.

Stoick’s mouth dropped open, his eyes wide. “Why would you—”

“Because I didn’t want to mess with your image,” Hiccup said. “Because Mum looked so happy when I said that I was bringing someone, and because for once, I didn’t want to be the disappointment.”

“You’re not—”

“Don’t say that I’m not,” Hiccup said. “Don’t say that when you look at me like I’m a mistake.”

Stoick took a step back, for once, shocked into silence.

Once Hiccup had started, he found it hard to stop. “I can never meet your expectations, not a single one. Ever since my accident, look at me like I’m a huge disappointment. And you drag everyone else into it too. Why’d you think Astrid left? If you hadn’t made such a big deal about us coming here – ordering tickets behind our backs without telling us, like it was some big favour, maybe she’d have stuck around. And you know why? It is exhausting being a part of the Haddock family and it is suffocating being your son.”

He was yelling by the time he’d finished his speech, and as his last sentence rang out and the room turned to silence, Hiccup’s heart sank as regret filled his stomach.

The silence continued, as Stoick’s expression shifted from hurt to anger, his eyes turning to dark pools, hands rounded into fists.

Hiccup’s face softened. “Dad, I—”

“No, Hiccup,” Stoick said, his voice dangerous. Hiccup closed his mouth. “You do not get to speak right now. I will admit that at times me and your mother have been a little overbearing. If you feel that we’ve not been supportive enough of you, well, that’s your opinion. But do not—” he took a step towards his son and Hiccup shrunk back— “do not blame us for what happened with Astrid. From the moment you introduced us to her, we have done nothing but be welcoming, because you told us that she was someone you cared about a lot. You’re not a teenager anymore,
it’s time to stop blaming your parents for your problems and own up to your own mistakes. We didn’t drive Astrid away. You did.”

His father turned on his heel and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving Hiccup alone in the silence.

Astrid’s flat felt horribly small and empty in comparison to Hiccup’s childhood home. It was exactly as she had left it - clothes all over the floor, kitchen a mess. She had to pinch her fingers over her nose when she opened the fridge, assaulted with the putrid smell of all the rotting food she should have thrown way before she’d left. Of all the talk she’d given Hiccup about being a responsible adult, packing for yourself and calling your mother so she wouldn’t worry, clearly she wasn’t much better. That was a bitter thought, and she slammed the fridge closed, stomping off to look elsewhere.

She scrabbled her way through cupboard after cupboard, but there wasn’t any sign of anything edible, not even in the drawer she always kept stocked with chocolate bars and biscuits for emergencies. Everything was empty, and she cursed herself for not thinking about this before. She closed the drawer and let out a shout, covering her hands over her face and kicking the cabinet.

After a moment of sitting still on her kitchen stool, leg bouncing up and down with restless energy, she snatched her keys up from where she’d left them on the counter top, storming outside, slamming the door behind her.

She hadn’t given much thought to where she was going, but as she turned the corner, her eyes found a destination, and for a moment, she stood outside, wondering if she should go in. Then she gave a sigh, and marched through the door.

The bar looked the same as it always had - grubby and dingy, the counter top sticky and the stools horribly rickety. She slid onto a seat in front of the bar. The bartender blinked at her, and Astrid inwardly screamed when she realised it was someone she recognised, and instantly regretted her decision to come in here instead of any other nondescript bar in the city where she could be fully anonymous. The shame of what she’d done - leaving her job to run off with a guy - still burned hot under her skin. Perhaps that was why she had come here; it was her punishment for the way she’d acted.

“Astrid?” the woman behind the bar said, her voice rising in pitch. “What are you doing here? I thought you-”

“I didn’t come here to work,” Astrid said, irritably. “I came here to drink.”

“I can help you with that,” she said. “What do you want?”

“Just give me whatever, I don’t care,” Astrid mumbled. She sighed, rubbing her hands across her face and inwardly laughed bitterly at the irony of what she was about to say. “I’ve done something stupid, Cami.”

Her cousin, Cami, who worked with Hiccup during the week and bar-tended for extra cash on certain days, was one of the last people she wanted to see. It had been great once upon a time - the nights when she and Cami both worked were the most fun. She was a fun person to be around. She found trouble like no one else did, and she always made serving shitty, drunk customers much more fun.
But now, Astrid didn’t want to look her in the eye. Cami and Hiccup had always been thick as thieves, and after everything that had happened, the last thing she wanted to do was be around people that reminded her of him.

Cami regarded her with narrowed eyes, sliding a drink across the table towards her. Astrid took it and downed it. It burned as it went down, but Astrid didn’t care. She pushed the glass back across the bar.

“More.”

Cami frowned, but she took the glass from her and filled it up again. “Look, Astrid, I get off in ten minutes. Do you want to go back to mine and talk about it?”

Astrid felt her throat close up. “Just as long as you’re not going to ask me to be your fake girlfriend,” she said, giving a fake laugh as her voice wobbled.

Then she burst into tears.

Hiccup lay face down on his bed, his head pressed firmly into the pillow, guilt eating away at him like nothing else.

He’d done a splendid job of messing everything up, and ruining every single relationship he cared about. The atmosphere in the Haddock home was tense; Stoick had been completely blanking Hiccup. He left the room when Hiccup entered, barely spoke at meals, and did everything he could to avoid his son. Hiccup didn’t blame him - the way he’d spoken to his father was unforgivable. He’d driven a wrench into the relationship he had with his father, just as the hole between them was starting to mend. Was there no end to his stupidity?

Toothless was curled up next to him, as usual utterly aware of his owner’s mental state, and mewed gently. Hiccup couldn’t even bring himself to scratch the little cat behind the ears, like he always did.

After a few moments, there was a creak as his door opened.

“Go away,” Hiccup mumbled.

The door opened further.

“Now, really,” the voice of Val said, “is that any way to talk to your mother?”

Hiccup sighed, and mumbled an apology into his pillow.

The bed shifted downwards, and there was an indignant meow from Toothless as he was turfed off the bed onto the floor, and Val took a seat next to her son. She put a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright, Hiccup?”

“I’m fine,” he said, an obvious lie. He turned over onto his back and sat up. “You’re not angry with me?”

Val pressed her lips together. “I think there are enough people angry with you at the moment.”

“Dad’s furious,” Hiccup said, quietly. “He’s not going to forgive me.”

“I’m sure he will.”
“He won’t,” he said, and his voice cracked. “He must hate me now.”

Val tilted her head and frowned. “You know that’s not true.”

“You didn’t hear the things I said to him,” Hiccup said.

“Hiccup,” Val said, her voice becoming somewhat stern. “There’s nothing that you could say to make your father hate you. You’re too important to him for that. He might be a stubborn as mule - you both are - but he’ll forgive you eventually. You know that.”

Hiccup pursed his lips, but said nothing.

“Look, there’s something else I wanted to ask,” Val said with a sigh, carding a hand through her hair. “I know you think you missed your chance to make things right with Astrid, but if you really think that you need to go back home and fix things with her, well, I could get you on the next flight out there.”

Hiccup blinked, and sat up. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“But the wedding’s in two days.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You’d be willing to let me miss the wedding so that I can go and talk to Astrid?”

Val sighed, and laid down on Hiccup’s bed, her fingers drumming up and down on her stomach. Hiccup waited.

“I want you to be happy,” she said, finally. “And that girl makes you really, really happy. If this is what you want, then I’m happy to do it.”

“It’s not what I want,” Hiccup said.

“It isn’t?”

“No,” he said, with conviction. “I would never miss your wedding. You’ve been waiting so long to do it, I’m not going to ruin it by not being there.” His voice wobbled. “I’ve been a terrible son.”

Val looked at him for a moment, her eyes glossing over. She pulled him into a hug. “You’re not terrible,” she whispered into his hair. “You’re wonderful.”

“I’m not,” Hiccup said, his voice cracking, “but I’m trying to be better.”

“I thought it wouldn’t matter,” Astrid mumbled, holding the bottle in front of her face. Her legs were pressed into her chest, her back leaning against Cami’s sofa. “I thought we’d hold hands for a little bit, make his parents happy and then go home. I didn’t know it was going to turn into a month long special. His mum just looked so happy and he looked so relieved when I said I’d do it.”

Cami nods, crossing her legs and listening intently.
“And kept going on and on about how it wouldn’t be for long and how we’d go back to being friends again,” Astrid said, taking a gulp of her drink. “But he didn’t seem to be making any plans about when to tell his parents we had broken up, and his mum was talking about weddings and his dad was acting like I was already part of the family, and it all just got so messed up.”

“God, Hiccup’s an idiot,” Cami muttered.

Astrid blinked at her. Cami had been oddly quiet while Astrid has been explaining it all. She usually had something to say about everything, but until now, she’d kept her mouth shut, and quiet contemplation crossing her face while she’d been listening.

“We’ve been placing bets at work for years about you two,” Cami explained, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. “In the office and at the bar. Maybe he just hasn’t realised, but he looks at you like you hung the universe. Every time he came in that bloody bar, or you came to visit him in the office, we were all waiting for the moment he’d say something.”

Astrid sighed. Then she groaned, and her face crumpled into her hands. “Oh God, work.”

“Look, if it’s any consolation, the bar’s probably going to close down anyway,” Cami said, putting a hand on Astrid’s shoulder. “It’s not been making enough money and the boss has been looking for an excuse to get rid of people. It wasn’t all to do with you.”

“Still,” Astrid muttered, thumping her head back against the sofa. “What am I supposed to do for money? How am I going to pay rent? What kind of idiot must I be to think that jetting off to some island with my fake-boyfriend was a good idea?”

She choked then, a half laugh, a half sob.

Cami wrapped an arm around her in one of her rare moments of affection, and Astrid tilted her head to rest it on her shoulder.

“You’re going to be okay,” Cami said, rubbing Astrid’s arm. “You know how I know that?”

“How?”

“Because you’re Astrid Hofferson,” Cami said, a smile quirking at her lips. “And if I know Astrid Hofferson like I do, then I know you’re going to wake up tomorrow and find a way to fix it. Because Astrid Hofferson doesn’t give up, especially not for a guy.”

Astrid raised her bottle, miserably. “I’m okay to fall apart tonight, though, right?”

Cami’s face softened. “Just for tonight.”

Cami bit her lip.

Astrid was asleep on her sofa, having finally passed out after all that she’d drunk, and she was curled up onto one side, hair tossed all over the place like a tangled blonde waterfall.

It made Cami’s heart hurt.

They’d been born the same year. Their mothers were sisters, and the two of them had shouldered together their way through pregnancy until they’d both brought two girls into the world; two girls that were everything alike and nothing alike at all at the same time. Cami had always been the
erratic one. She’d been *messy*. She was the one that dealt badly with emotional pain, that covered things up with a smile while self-destructing in every manner she could see fit. Astrid was the one that kept it together. Astrid met every problem head on and always came out on top, neat, put together and every bit the adult that Cami had never managed to be. Even after the incident with Astrid’s mother - Cami’s aunt - at the church, Astrid had kept herself together.

There had been too many times to count when Cami had been the one passed out on the sofa, while her cousin had looked after her in the way only her cousin could. Now that the roles were reversed, Cami didn’t know what to do.

As the time ticked by, she found Astrid a blanket and tucked it over her body, before picking up her phone from the counter and heading out into the night air, taking a blanket and sitting cross-legged on the pavement outside of her flat. She looked down at Astrid’s phone, entering in the lock number that her cousin hadn’t changed in years, and found Hiccup’s phone number in the contacts.

Her eyes flickered back towards the door and then back down at the phone. Astrid would kill her for this. She knew she shouldn’t do it.

She pressed Hiccup’s number anyway.

It rang for a half a second before she heard Hiccup’s voice on the other side.

“Astrid?”

He sounded so hopeful, Cami felt a little bit of guilt creep into her gut for what she was about to say to one of her best friends.

“Wrong Hofferson,” she said, and was surprised at how steely her voice sounded.

“Oh,” he said, and Cami could hear the deflate in his voice even across the phone. “*Is she okay? Why do you have her phone? Where is she?”*

“She’s fine. She’s sleeping,” she said. “Hiccup, what the fuck did you do?”

There was an edge to her voice, her tone that she rarely used, and by the pause on the other end of the phone, Hiccup had heard it too. She heard him sigh and it crackled through the phone. “Cami, I messed up.”

“Oh yeah, you bet you did,” Cami said. “I *told* you this wasn’t going to go well. I *told* you not to do anything stupid.”

“I know,” Hiccup said, in that pitiful voice she hated so much. “I’m only going to make this worse. I tried to go after again, Cami, I swear. I went to the airport. I tried to stop her getting on the plane.”

Cami’s voice was flat. “*Why did* she get on the plane, then?”
I didn’t get there in time. The plane had left by the time I’d got to the gate.”

“Should’ve been quicker, then,” Cami said, coldly.

“I know.”

She’d had enough of this. Whatever she’d been trying to achieve by ringing him hadn’t worked, and instead she’d found the anger hot in the back of her throat, the vision of her strong, wonderful, beautiful cousin, passed out on the sofa, hurt and broken inside, strong in her mind, and she found the part of her brain that stopped her from saying stupid things had had enough.

“Hiccup,” she said, her voice sharp. “I’ve had enough of this pathetic act of yours. You really, really hurt my cousin—” she heard him suck in his breath on the other end of his phone— “and no one hurts my cousin like that. If you truly want to fix this, if you really want her to forgive you, get off your ass and do something about it. Otherwise - leave her the hell alone.”

She ended the call, guilt burning in her stomach, bile rising in her throat. She hadn’t wanted to say that to Hiccup. He was her friend, and he’d always been a good one. She never wanted to upset Hiccup, but the way he’d treated her cousin, one of her most favourite people in the world, had made her impossibly angry. She’d apologise for it later when he finally came back to work, but for now, she’d let it stew.

She let out a huff, her breath catching on the night air. It may have been summer, but that didn’t mean that it was a warm night. She wrapped the blanket she’d brought out around herself, and drummed her legs up and down on the floor. The guilt was still hot in her stomach, not just for what she’d done to Hiccup, but how it might have affect Astrid. Goddamn it. Why was she having to learn over and over again to think before she acted?

She bit her lip, looking down at her phone. There was one more person she needed to call.

Hiccup stared at his phone, Cami’s brash voice still lingering in the air after she’d finished the call. The pit in his stomach was only getting bigger. He’d never heard Cami sound so cold. It wasn’t that Cami was usually all that nice to him - Cami teased, and berated and scoffed - but her voice had been like ice.

It seemed that there was no end to the list of people that Hiccup was pissing off.

It was late, and his mind kept wandering to whatever was happening over on the mainland that had caused Cami to call him so angry. She’d said that Astrid was fine, but Hiccup couldn’t help the fog of thoughts that told him something was wrong. The pit in his stomach grew bigger and bigger.

His room was lit by the dim light of his laptop, the slightly blue light making his eyes ache. He had that same blank word document open, the words: A Speech About Love written at the top and underlined. Underneath that, the cursor blinked in and out, mockingly.

He’d been sitting there for a while. He’d been painfully aware of how close the wedding was, and in all the commotion, he’d forgotten about the stupid speech he was supposed to write. It was a painful bitter irony that he had to sit there and write about love when he’d never had it or understood it.

How could he write about the heart when his own heart was breaking?
But he couldn’t - and he would not - let his parents down. Not after the way he’d been treating them. He hadn’t spoken to his father in a while. The last time Hiccup had seen him, Stoick’s eyes had slid over him and pressed his lips together. It was clear that there was nothing his father had to say to him. It stung.

Hiccup’s eyes were drooping, his head threatening to slump down onto the keyboard. He wanted nothing more than to go and sink down into his bed and shroud himself in blankets, but he’d promised himself that he’d get at least a sentence of this speech done before he let himself go to sleep.

No matter how hard he tried, his thoughts kept floating back to Astrid, and after a while he sighed, typing one sentence, and then slamming his laptop lid shut.

**A Speech About Love**

-I-

_I want my best friend back._
Her mother’s home felt horribly small and scrubby after spending a month around the Haddock’s. When Astrid stepped over the threshold, she stepped straight on a pile of letters, left lying haphazardly on the welcome mat. She bent down to pick them up, bringing into the kitchen, where her mother was already putting the kettle on.

“You ever think about picking these up once in a while?” Astrid said in lieu of a hello, dropping herself into a seat. She swiped a thumb up through one of the envelopes, ripping it open and pulling out the letter from inside.

“You don’t want to be looking at those,” her mother said, bustling over with tea and a plate of biscuits. “Nothing but scare-mongering, and certainly nothing that anyone but me needs to worry about.”

Astrid thumbed through the letters, stopping about halfway through. “These are all bills, Mum.”

“Yes,” her mother said airily, taking them from her and absentmindedly slinging them across the counter. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Are you having money problems?”

“I told you, there’s nothing to worry—”

“Because if something’s wrong, Mum, you really need to tell me.”

“Astrid—”

“—I don’t want you to think that you can’t tell me things. I want you to tell me things. I want to —”

“Astrid Hofferson.”

Her mother’s voice took on a stern edge, and she drew herself to her full, imposing height.

Over all the years of knowing him, Hiccup had told Astrid over and over again how intimidating his father was. She’d been a little afraid to meet him. But having got to know Stoick, and the way his eyes softened and crinkled when he smiled, and his shoulders squared in a way that you knew was a warning. There were moments where Astrid could see where Hiccup was coming from, but really, when it came to Mrs. Hofferson, Hiccup’s father did not compare.

Astrid pressed her mouth shut.

Her mother’s eyes softened. “You really think I wouldn’t tell you if things were that bad?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know whether you would or not.”

Bertha Hofferson got down onto her knees, taking hold of Astrid’s hands and looking at her in the eye. “You don’t have to look after me, Astrid. I’m managing just fine.”

“I just want to help.”
“I know. You always have.” Bertha cupped Astrid’s cheek and smiled. “You’re a marvel, Astrid, you know that? All that pain and hurt, and all you do is worry about me. Do you know what it does to me to find out that my daughter’s been so unhappy from someone else? When were you going to tell me about this boy?”

Astrid blinked. “Who told you?”

“Cami called me a few nights ago.”

Astrid pulled away from her mother’s grip, her fist clenching. “Should’ve known not to tell her anything! That little-”

Her mother let out a laugh, a deep belly laugh, and for a moment, Astrid was reminded strangely of Stoick. “She’d told me you’d react like that,” Bertha said, as the laughter subsided. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Astrid tipped her head back and sighed. “It’s a long story.”

Bertha scraped a chair back from the table and sat down in front of her. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

There was a pause, as Bertha sat quietly and watched her daughter expectantly. It took a while for Astrid to look at her mother properly, her eyes focusing a moment on the kitchen window, looking out at the wind blowing outside. She gave another sigh.

“It’s about Hiccup,” she said, finally.

Bertha’s eyes twinkled. “Of course it is.”

Something about her mother’s voice set Astrid’s teeth on edge. “Why does everyone say that? Why does everyone act as if me and Hiccup is so inevitable?”

Her voice was bitter than coffee.

“You haven’t seen yourselves together.”

Astrid stuck her lower lip out. “Everyone says that too.”

Bertha did her best to hide her smile. “Sorry. Carry on.”

“He asked me to pretend to be his girlfriend for a day so that his parents wouldn’t be disappointed in him,” Astrid said, bluntly.

Her mother blinked, and sank back into her seat. “Well, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“There’s more.”

Bertha nodded. “Go on.”

In that moment, Astrid caved, and told her mother everything. Once the words started to pour out, they didn’t stop, and Astrid found herself telling her mother every single detail of the whole convoluted story, beginning with the reunion, right up until her plane had landed on the mainland. As the story finished, Astrid sank back into the chair, almost tired out after recounting the whole thing.

She looked up at her mother, who was sitting rather still in her chair, watching her intently, her expression unreadable.
“Whatever,” Astrid said, quickly. “It’s done now. I don’t have to think about it anymore.”

“You don’t?” Bertha arched an eyebrow.

“No, I don’t. It’s time to move on.”

Bertha sighed, leaning closer towards her, looking down at Astrid with stern eyes. “Why are you always trying to hide how you really feel?”

“I’m not,” Astrid insisted.

“Then why won’t you tell me what’s really going on in that head of yours?”

“Because it’s embarrassing!” Astrid dropped her head into her hands, her fingers curling through her hair. “I did everything a Hofferson isn’t supposed to do. I did a bunch of stupid things because a man asked me to. Mum, I quit my job because of him!” she said. “And even now that he’s messed me over, even though I’m so angry at him, I still want to forgive him. And honestly? I’ve been wondering all the time if it was my fault this all happened. What if I’d just said something to begin with? What if I’d just talked to him about it?” She took a breath. “And I’ve been trying so hard to do what you do, what all Hofferson women do, to put him out of my mind, not think about him and move on, but I just can’t. I’m weak.”

“Astrid,” Bertha said, her voice soft. She took her daughter’s hands in hers again. “Astrid, I sincerely hope that I have never taught you that when things go wrong in our lives we are not allowed to fall apart. There is nothing weak about having feelings.”

“But you never let them get to you,” Astrid said, “when Dad left—” Bertha sucked in a breath—“it was like you flicked a switch. After the wedding, I saw you cry once, and then it was like he didn’t matter anymore. You didn’t let it phase you. It was like nothing had changed.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Bertha said, a wobble to her voice. “I had to act normal. I had to look after you. I had an eleven-year-old daughter that didn’t understand why your dad wasn’t coming home, and I couldn’t just stop functioning. Who would have taken care of you? I didn’t want you to have a horrible childhood just because your mother was always miserable.” Bertha swallowed. “The truth is: it took me years to get over your father. Getting to the altar and realising you’ve been stood up on isn’t something you can just get over. You think there weren’t times when I fell apart in a friends’ arms? You think there weren’t days when I felt like it wasn’t worth getting out of bed?”

Astrid opened her mouth and closed it again. It felt like a heavy weight had been rested on her chest, the revelation of all of the things she’d never known about her mother coming alight at once.

“Being a strong woman isn’t about not having feelings,” Bertha said. “It’s choosing what we do with them.”

Astrid pressed her lips together. “What about my job?” she said, in a small voice.

Bertha frowned. “I can’t say that I condone leaving a job for a man,” she said, “but did you really? You kept telling me over and over again how much you hated that job and how much you wanted to leave. The last time we talked about it, you said you felt like you were stuck there. Are you sure you weren’t just looking for a reason to go?”

Astrid blinked.

“Take it as an opportunity, Astrid,” Bertha said. “You’re a smart girl. You always deserved so
much better than that job.”

“What should I do now?” Astrid said, staring at her hands. “After Hiccup, after everything, I just.”

“I can’t tell you how to do this,” her mother said, “that’s something you’ve got to do for yourself. But I know you’re going to deal with this in a way that only Astrid Hofferson could. Take a day. Take two. Take all the time you need to fall apart, and then, I know you’re going to put yourself back together again, and somehow, it’ll be an even better you than before.”

Unable to stop herself, Astrid jumped out of her seat, her arms flying around her mother, pulling her into a big hug. “Thanks, Mum,” she whispered.

“Anytime, kid.”

The garden was bathed in orange with the evening glow, as the sun settled down behind the cliffs.

It was a much smaller garden than the one at his parents’ country home - but just as nice. Gobber had been keeping it tidy in their absence, and the lawn was freshly cut. Bright flowers wound their way up the back fence and up the walls of the house, red roses and honeysuckle. There was a gentle buzzing of bees, completing their last route between the flowers before the sun went down completely.

Val was out on the deck, sat on a bench swing, a book and a glass of wine in her hands, gently swinging back and forth with her feet. She smiled up at Hiccup as he opened the doors and joined her on the deck, wrapping his arms around himself.

It was cold for a summer evening. Hiccup had found one of his old favourite sweaters in a drawer, the one that had been three sizes too big for him in high school and was still too big for him now. The sleeves hung way off the ends of his hands. It was comforting, somehow.

"Where's Dad?" Hiccup mumbled.

"He popped out to get something from the corner shop," Val said. "Are you going to come join me, Hiccup?"

Hiccup shuffled over and joined her on the bench, tucking his legs up. His fingers tapped against his shoes. Val turned a page in her book.

"Mum, can I ask you something?" Hiccup said, after a few moments had passed.

Val tucked a bookmark into the page she was reading and closed the book, putting it down beside her. "Of course, Hiccup, I've always got time for you," she said, with the same gentle smile she’d always given him.

The same gentle smile she always gave everyone.

Hiccup took a breath. “How do you write speeches?”

There was a silence. Val tucked a few stray strands of hair behind her ear, and looked down at Hiccup quizzically. Her eyebrows had shot up at the question, like it wasn’t what she had expected to be asked.

“You haven’t finished that yet?” she said. It didn’t sound judgemental. Just interested.
“I just can’t think of what to write,” Hiccup admitted, staring down at his hands on his knees. “Dad said it could be a speech about love, but it turns out I don’t know very much about that all.”

Val pursed her lips and looked down at the boy sadly. When his eyes flickered back up to her, she stroked her chin thoughtfully. “Well,” she said, after a few moments had passed. “It seems to me that the best speeches are the ones that are honest. Find the truth in what you’re saying. Find your truth.”

“What does that mean?”

“Say how you feel,” Val said. “Your truth will be exactly how you feel.”

Hiccup blinked, and stared at the ground. “What if what I feel is really bad?” His voice was low, barely a whisper.

“Then it will make one hell of a speech.”

“Really?”

“Hiccup,” Val said, reaching out a finger and lifting his chin up, “in my experience, there’s no one on this Earth whose feelings are uniquely theirs. Chances are, what you’re feeling, someone else out there is feeling too. So, no matter what happens, speaking the truth is going to resonate with someone, somewhere.”

“I just don’t want to say something bad that might ruin your wedding,” Hiccup said, his voice very, very small. “Weddings are supposed to be happy. What if I ruin it by giving a terrible speech?”

Val let out a laugh, her eyes glittering. “Hiccup, we’re Haddocks. What makes you think anything about this wedding is going to be conventional?”

Hiccup smiled then, albeit a very small one.

He moved his legs back down to the floor, and the swing gave a gentle squeak as it inched back and forth.

“I just…” Hiccup mumbled, his voice trailing away. “Don’t know what to say.”

Val offered him a small smile and a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You’ll find something.”

Neither of them said anything for a while, and for a moment, all that could be heard were the sounds of the bees buzzing and the gentle wind moving through the garden.

“She’ll come round,” Val said, after a while.

“No, she won’t,” Hiccup said, his voice so quiet that it was only because she was sitting right next to him that she could hear. “You don’t know how badly I treated her.”

“Then it’s your job to fix it, Hiccup.” Her voice was a little sterner.

Hiccup blinked, and stared up at her.

Val looked back down at him with a fiery intensity in her eyes. “If you really want her back, it has to come from you,” she said. “You care about her, right?”

“More than anything,” he said. He didn’t even have to think.
“Then it’s up to you to prove to her that you do.”

Hiccup stared at his mother, and then back down at his hands.

Later, when he was back alone in his room, he picked up his phone, and dialled her number.

On the first day, Astrid woke up on her sofa, fully-clothed with aching limbs and a thumping headache.

It turned out that ‘taking all the time she needed to fall apart’ had resulted in another night of drinking, and that morning, she'd stumbled into the kitchen and caught a glance of herself mirrored in the microwave door - yesterday's make up smeared across her face, skin a pasty grey. She'd moved towards the sink to splash water on her face, only to find the sink filled with the contents of her stomach, which was enough to make her throw up into the bin.

That sent her right back to her bedroom, where she pulled off her clothes, found her favourite pyjamas and put her head under a pillow for the rest of the day. *You're wrong about me, Mum,* she thought to herself. *I'm never going to deal with this.*

On the second day, Astrid woke up comfortable, and for the first few minutes of the day, she'd forgotten about the past week. Then, she remembered the past week and almost put the pillow back over her head. But instead, she wandered into the kitchen, pulled on thick yellow gloves, and dealt with the sick in the sink, no matter how much it made her want to vomit again.

After the sink was clean, she'd gone back into her room, ready to fall under her duvet covers again, only for her stomach to growl, reminding her that she hadn't eaten for a while. Astrid opened her laptop, found her favourite pizza delivery service and ordered. Her fingers hovered over the pineapple option - an automatic twitch from sharing pizza with Hiccup so much, and she almost shut the laptop lid on her fingers. She ordered her pizza and only felt a small amount of shame when she wrote in the delivery instruction box: *Leave the pizza on the doorstep. Money is under the doormat.*

Then, she'd spent the rest of the day stuffing her face, a blanket wrapped around her while she watched as many Gilmore Girls episodes as she could fit into 24 hours.

And on the third day: she got out of bed, got dressed, tied her hair back and began to sort her life out.

First, she stuck her speakers on in the kitchen, loud, angry pop music thumping through her flat while she cleaned. After a few songs had gone by, Astrid found herself screaming the lyrics and dancing, wildly thrusting her arms this way and that as she bounced around. As the playlist shuffled through and she danced her way through the day, she began to forget about silly green-eyed cat obsessed boys.

After the flat was as clean as it had ever been, she’d pulled up a chair to the table she worked at, opened her laptop and began to look for jobs. She looked through all sorts of job lists, sent her name and qualifications to as many places as possible, and wrote a dozen emails enquiring about work.

Then, Astrid shoved her keys in her pocket and went out to the nearest supermarket, filling her fridge and her cupboard with stuff she could eat and filled the emergency chocolate drawer up again, only to empty it and drag the entire contents to her bedroom.
And after all of that, she dropped onto her bed, surrounding herself in chocolate, her laptop resting on her stomach while she lay on the bed, scrolling through Facebook and Tumblr. She was almost starting to completely forget about Hiccup and about the whole month she’d had.

And then his name started flashing up on her phone.

“God, Haddock, not now,” she grumbled under breath, while the phone buzzed across the bedside table, threatening to fall off if she didn’t pick it up.

She just let it ring.

It seemed to go on forever. For a moment, Astrid thought it would never stop, that it would just keep on going until she had to pick it up and talk to him.

But eventually, the ringing stopped and it went to voice mail, Hiccup’s voice filling up the room.

“Astrid,” he said.

He sounded harrowed. *Good, Astrid thought to herself. Let him suffer.*

“Look, I know you’re probably listening right now, and I don’t blame you for not picking up. I wouldn’t. Listen, Astrid, I don’t have the words to tell you how sorry I am for the past month. I’ve treated you like crap, and I’ve made assumptions about how you feel about all of this, and I shouldn’t have done.” His voice crackled on the other line, and she could hear him swallowing. “This past month I’ve realised a lot of things about myself, in particular, the way I feel about you. I wasn’t pulling away because I stopped liking you, I pulled away because I assumed that you only ever wanted to be friends, and I didn’t want everything I was feeling to get in the way of that.”

Astrid shifted back up to a sitting position, staring at her phone.

“I was wrong to do that, and I’m so sorry that I hurt you. That’s the last thing I ever wanted to do, and I did it.”

She kept staring at the phone.

“The wedding’s in two days, and I’ll be back soon after that. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

There was a beep and Hiccup’s voice fizzled out. The room felt very quiet and empty after that.

His father was outside, his arms rested on the balcony fence, a mug of tea in his hands.

“Hey, Dad?” Hiccup said quietly, hovering at French window.

Stoick turned, and nodded. “Son.”

Hiccup shuffled out onto the balcony, joining him at the edge, twiddling his thumbs on top. For a moment, neither of them spoke, just listening to the sound of the wind. Goosebumps prickled across Hiccup’s arms.

He swiped his tongue across his lips. “You nervous?”

“To marry your mother?” Stoick chuckled. “Not in a million years. It just feels right at this
“You’re not...” Hiccup started, and then stopped. He tried again. “You’re not going to have any more kids are you?”

Stoick stared at him for a moment, and then tipped back his head and guffawed. “Why would you think that?”

A small smile tugged at Hiccup’s lips. “Isn’t it what married couples do?”

“I think we’re done with that,” Stoick said, his eyes twinkling. “Besides, you were a handful enough.”

Hiccup’s smile faltered. “Dad?”

His voice was quiet.

“Yes, son?”

“I’m sorry.”

Stoick turned around and blinked at him. “For what?”

“No saying my problems with Astrid were your fault. For screaming at you. I’ve been a terrible son.”

His father’s mouth opened wide.

“Hiccup,” Stoick said, speaking slowly, “do you really believe that me and Val think you’re a terrible son, that we’re disappointed in you? Is that what you really think?”

Hiccup didn’t say anything, shrinking in to himself. His fringe flopped over his eyes.

Stoick drew back two of the chairs, setting them out on the balcony. He took Hiccup’s hands in his and led him over, both sinking down into seats.

“What brought this thinking on?”

Hiccup shrugged, his fixing his gaze beyond the balcony, out onto the horizon. He swallowed.

“Everyone always talked about how great you and Mum were,” he said, finally. “It’s all I ever used to hear. You were the pride of the Haddock family, Dad, you really were. People used to say that I had so much to live up to, and that if I wanted to be anything like you, I’d have to change.”

Stoick’s expression took a darker turn. “Who, exactly, used to tell you that?”

“People,” Hiccup said, kicking his heel against the ground, still refusing to look at his father. “When I was really young, people used to say ‘gee, how great is that kid going to be?’ Like, how could a child belonging to Stoick and Val possibly be anything less than great? But after a while, they stopped saying it. I heard people talking all the time, ‘it’s a shame about that Hiccup kid,’ ‘he’s nothing like his father’. I heard someone once ask if I was even yours.”

Hiccup’s voice cracked, and then, before he could stop himself, he was sniffing, and trying to inconspicuously wipe a tear away. “The more I heard it from everyone else, the more I thought I was hearing it from you and Mum. Like, when you’d ask me whether I thought taking Art at University was a good option. And when you’d ask me about whether or not I’d ever get a girlfriend.”

“That’s why you did all this,” Stoick said, “because you thought it’d impress us?”
“Not at first.” Hiccup wiped another tear away with the back of his hand. “I had an argument. With Snotlout.”

“Makes sense,” Stoick grunted.

“He was making fun of me, I said something dumb. I wasn’t going to do anything about it, but then word got back to Mum,” Hiccup said. “You saw the look on her face. It was the proudest I’d ever seen her: like I’d finally managed to do something right.”

“You’re wrong,” Stoick said, sharply.

Hiccup blinked.

“Look at me, Hiccup,” he said, taking his son’s hands again.

Hiccup finally looked up at his father, seeing, for the first time, the furrow that had been in Stoick’s brow since the conversation began.

“I wish I could have held up a mirror and let you see yourself for the past month,” Stoick said, “because it was the happiest I have ever seen you in your whole life. We never would have suspected that you were faking, or that what you and Astrid had wasn’t real, because the look on your face was like nothing we’d ever seen from you.”

Hiccup sat in stunned silence.

“Val and I always knew you weren’t entirely happy,” Stoick continued, “but we never really knew why. It broke our hearts, Hiccup, to know that something we were doing was making you miserable. That’s why we tried to accept all of your decisions, even if we didn’t understand them: like moving the mainland alone, refusing to accept our money, avoiding us as if we were the plague. Nothing you did seemed to make you happy.” Stoick rolled his shoulders back, took a breath, and carried on, “then there was all this talk about you and a girl, and Val and I were shocked because we’d never heard anything about a girl from you. Then you brought her to the reunion, and you should have seen yourself, Hiccup—” Stoick smiled the memory – “your eyes lit up, and I’d never seen you smile as much as when you were with her. We were happy, Hiccup, because you were happy.”

He moved closer to Hiccup, gripping his hands harder. “We’ve always been proud of you. Always. As for whether you’re mine—” Stoick shifted further still, his eyes taking up a fiery intensity – “I see all of the best parts of me in you. There’s no question that you’re mine, not even for a second.”

By now the tears are falling freely between the two of them, and Hiccup leans forward and wraps his arms around his father. “Dad,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I’m so sorry. I’m so—”

Stoick shushed him, closing his eyes and wrapping his arms tight around his son. “I think you and I have had a few problems communicating, haven’t we?”

“Yeah,” Hiccup choked out, half a laugh between the tears. “We have.”

After a few moments of holding each other, Stoick released Hiccup from his grip. “Now,” he said, using a thumb to flick one of Hiccup’s tears away, “I know us Haddock men have struggled to have a good conversation in the past, but that’s always something we could work on. Maybe with... dinner once a week? I think your mother would like that.”

Hiccup smiled. “I think I’d really like that too.”
Before he could disappear into the house, Hiccup turned and hovered in the doorway.

“Dad?”

“Mmm?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, son.”
The morning of the wedding dawned with sun streaming through Hiccup’s windows, and he found himself gently and pleasantly roused from sleep just a few minutes before his alarm. As he put on his prosthetic, he resolved to himself that today would be different. He was not going to ruin Stoick and Val’s day by moping around. He’d made his mistakes, and he was dealing with them, and he was going to act on this day like the good son he was: thrilled and excited to see his parents finally tying the knot.

Downstairs was less serene than his room had been. Despite the early hour, the house was already in turmoil. All of Val’s female friends had showed up to help her get ready for the day, and when Hiccup stumbled down the stairs, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, it seemed like half the town was parading through the house like a horde of elephants.

“Hiccup!” one of them chided, as he hopped down from the last step, “have you only just woken up? It’s been mad down here, boy, mad. Take these to your mother, she’s in the living room!”

She shoved a bouquet of flowers at Hiccup’s chest, and he fumbled to catch them, taking a moment to decipher what the woman had just said to him.

“Oh well,” he mumbled, to the woman who had already left the room, and navigated his way through the house to the living room.

Val was sitting in the eye of the storm, the only woman there not in a panic. She sat on a chair, a woman behind her brushing her hair out in broad strokes, twisting some of it around in a way that almost made Hiccup wince. Val’s eyes lit up when she saw Hiccup coming towards her, and a grin spread across her face.

“Hello!” she said, her eyes shining. “Nice to see you awake. Are those for me?”

“Yeah,” Hiccup said, and handed them to her. “A mysterious woman shoved them at me when I came down the stairs.” Hiccup looked around the house as if he’d only just noticed the people that had taken over their home. “Actually, now that I think about it, the whole house is filled with strange women. Where’s Dad?”

A smile tugged at the edge of Val’s lips. “I’ve been told very seriously that I’m not allowed to see him until I’m at the altar. Rather silly, really.”

The hair stylist frowned. “She’s impossible,” she said, addressing Hiccup. “I’ve already caught her trying to sneak Stoick in around the back, more than once. Don’t you know it’s bad luck?”

“Luck is for people younger than me,” Val said. “And it’s not like I haven’t been living with the man for over twenty years. What could possibly go wrong at this point?”

“She’s got a point,” Hiccup said. The stylist glared at him.

“You couldn’t just check on your father, would you? Make sure that Gobber hasn’t got into as much of a fuss as everyone here has, you know how he is,” Val said.

“No problem,” Hiccup said. “I’ll bring him around the other entrance, where no one will see him.”

“You will not!” the hair stylist snapped, and she sounded so scandalised that both Hiccup and Val
burst into laughter.

The woman made a *hmph* sound, and Hiccup and Val smothered their giggles, their eyes meeting as they covered their grins with their hands.

“Good luck, Mum,” Hiccup said, as they finally stopped laughing. “I’ll see you later.”

“I don’t need luck,” Val said, her eyes shining. “All I need is you and your father.”

Hiccup accepted a kiss on the cheek from his mother - “*Don’t smudge your make-up!*” the stylist screamed - and then headed off out towards Gobber’s house.

Gobber’s house was the same, if not worse, as the Haddock home had been.

Instead of a dozen panicked women running around the house and gabbling about things not being sorted, Gobber was the one panicking, hopping around the place and talking a mile a minute about how they were not going to be ready in time.

“You’re going to be late, Stoick, late!”

“The service isn’t until two.”

“You have to be there early. If you’re not waiting at the altar you’ll ruin the whole thing,” Gobber cried. “*Now, where are your cufflinks?!*”

“You took them away from me to put them somewhere safe,” Stoick said, gruffly.

When he saw Hiccup enter, he looked up at his son pleadingly. “Help me,” he said. “Gobber’s gone mad.”

Hiccup clapped his hands on Gobber’s shoulder to stop him from frantically running back and forth. “It’s all going to be fine, Gobber,” he said. “There’s no need to rush. It’s only eight in the morning. You’ve got plenty of time.”

“That’s what you think,” Gobber said, “but in the blink of an eye eight in the morning will become one o’clock in the afternoon and then you will all be the ones panicking.”

Stoick’s eyes met Hiccup’s, and he gestured at Gobber and then at the door. Hiccup got the message.

“So, hey, Gobber, I’ve just seen my mother,” Hiccup said, “it’s all a bit hectic down there. She sent me to make sure it was all good on this end. You couldn’t just go there and calm everything down there, could you? I’ll hold down the fort here.”

Gobber stopped moving and jabbed a thumb in Hiccup’s direction. “You better make sure that he doesn’t leave the house. He’s already tried to give me the slip twice. Don’t take your eyes off him.”

Then he sashayed backwards out the room, keeping his eyes narrowed on the two of them as he disappeared outside.

“Is it too late to elope?” Stoick deadpanned.

Hiccup tipped his head back and laughed. “He’s just excited, Dad. Everyone is. It’s going to be
the event of the season.”

He watched as his father fussed with his bow tie in the mirror, messing with it this way and that, and then finally letting it drop to the floor in disgust. “This is ridiculous,” his father said. “I should just go in jeans and a t-shirt.”

“Gobber wouldn’t let you,” Hiccup said, bending down and sweeping the bow-tie up into his hands. “C’mere.”

He swiftly looped the tie back around his neck and began tying it in front.

“Never understood how these blasted things work,” Stoick grumbled.

“It’s not too bad once you’ve learnt how,” Hiccup said. “So, you nervous?”

“Hardly,” his father said, drumming his fingers against his trouser leg. “It’s been a long time coming. We should’ve done it long ago.”

“Why didn’t you?” Hiccup asked, and when he didn’t get an answer, he looked up to where his father was looking down at him, thoughtfully. “It’s just that I don’t think I’ve ever asked. You’ve had all this time. Why now?”

“It was never the right time when we were young. We were busy people,” Stoick said, “a wedding is a lot of planning, a lot of time, a lot of money. We decided to wait until we had all that time, and all that money. And then we had you, and of course, we didn’t want to do it when you were a baby, that would have been too much stress. I think we both agreed that we wanted to do it when you were older. And then I guess it just passed us by. There was always a reason not to. We didn’t want to throw a wedding while you were recovering from your accident, that wouldn’t have been fair on you. And we didn’t want to do it while you were away at university. There was always something.”

“So why now?” Hiccup asked, as he set Stoick’s bow-tie into place.

Stoick thought to himself for a moment, pressing his lips together. “One day, I woke up and realised that there wasn’t much else I wanted in my life. Everything was close to perfect, and the one thing that would have been the cherry on top of everything would be getting to finally, officially call your mother my wife.”

“Well,” Hiccup said, with a grin. “Today’s the day. Are you ready for this?”

Stoick smiled down at his son. “Ready like I’ve never been for anything else in my life.”

The church had been done up beautifully. All of their work over the past month had paid off, and as Hiccup followed his father down to the church, he found himself thinking about Astrid for the first time that day. Something clenched in his stomach. The day was almost, almost perfect. His mother was beautiful, his father was as gruff as ever, and they were finally getting married like they were always supposed to, and yet somehow, something felt missing.

Without meaning to, Astrid had managed to carve out a place for herself amongst the Haddock family, and although it hadn’t really been real, it felt overwhelmingly odd for her not to be there. She’d made a place for herself in the family and in his heart, and somehow, she’d become the missing puzzle piece to what would have made this day perfect.
The ceremony went off without a hitch. Neither Val nor Stoick were late, and when Val stepped regally up the aisle, her arm linked through Gobber’s, Stoick actually shed a little tear. The vows were simple; after years of living together, there wasn’t much more that they needed to say. As much of a Haddock whole island extravaganza this was, the event itself was rather simple. It was just solidifying an unspoken promise that the two had made between each other, long ago.

The congregation floated into the reception flawlessly, and Hiccup took his seat at the top table, his father on one side and Old Wrinkly on the other. The day felt sharply bittersweet; on one hand, Hiccup was blissfully happy that his parents had finally made their union official. Not only was it the start of something new, but it marked the moment that the relationship between him and his parents had begun to heal. There had been a hole in his heart for so long, and that hole was finally stitching itself back together.

If only he hadn’t ripped a hole elsewhere.

As he listened to Gobber give a speech, set to raucous laughter from the audience, and from his parents, Hiccup felt himself frown. Astrid was meant to be here.

Old Wrinkly nudged him with his elbow.

“You alright, Hiccup?” he muttered.

His eyes flickered upwards, towards where Gobber was doing a spot-on impression of Stoick, leaving everyone in stitches.

“I’m fine,” he said, and it was only half a lie.

Old Wrinkly sighed. “What did I tell you about sleeping on sofas, boy?” he said, before his features softened. “She’ll forgive you.”

“Impossible after the things I said to her.”

“Improbable, Hiccup, not impossible.”

“That,” Hiccup said, as he looked up into Old Wrinkly’s twinkling eyes, “does not make feel any better.”

But he found himself smiling.

He turned his head back to listen to his speech, and found Alvin the Treacherous staring right back at him, a nasty smirk etched across his face.

As Gobber’s speech ended and the crowd burst into thunderous applause, Hiccup frowned.

“Y’know, grandfather,” he said, keeping his eyes on Alvin the entire time, a steely tone taking over his voice. “I think it’s time I put a stop to this.”

And then he reached for the microphone.

Hiccup took a deep breath, standing up behind the table and looking down at the crowd.

“A month ago,” he began, “my father asked me to write a speech about love for this wedding.”

He swallowed, and cleared his throat, took another breath to stop his voice from wobbling and held his hands behind his back so that the crowd wouldn’t see them quivering. “And quite
honestly, I freaked out—” everyone chuckled— “because I did not know anything about love. What I knew about love came from stories, and if there was one thing I was sure about, that kind of love would never happen to a guy like me.”

Everyone was listening intently to his words, and Hiccup had to take another deep breath before he said the next part. “But there was another reason why I was freaking out,” Hiccup said. “A few days before that, my mother and father held the annual family reunion, and as some of you may remember, I brought a date with me—” whooping and cheering came from the crowd – “A very beautiful, wonderful woman who everyone took too so quickly,” he said, his voice dry as he looked down on the crowd.

“I told everyone that she was my girlfriend,” Hiccup said. “But I was lying.”

Silence in the crowd. Val was staring wide-eyed at Hiccup. For one uncomfortable moment, Hiccup’s eyes met Snotlout’s in the audience, where he was staring open-mouthed.

“A week before the reunion, I’d had an argument with someone about my love life, and in a regrettable fit of anger I told them I was taken, and of course, as it always does, word got back to my parents,” he said, turning his head to the side to smile sheepishly at Stoick and Val. “And honestly, Mum, Dad, you both looked so happy that I couldn’t find it in myself to tell you the truth. So, I did something crazy.”

The crowd was hanging on to Hiccup’s every word now. “I asked my best friend in the world if she would come and pretend to be my girlfriend for the day,” he said, “and for some crazy reason, she said yes. I thought it’d be simple. We’d go around for the day and hold hands, maybe kiss each other on the cheek, and that would be it, just for the day—” he shot a grin at his parents. “But, as we all know, nothing in the Haddock family is that simple.”

A small chuckle from the audience spurred Hiccup on. “Before we knew what was happening, Astrid and I had agreed to turn what was supposed to be a day into a whole month of pretending we were in a relationship, and two weeks ago, we set off on a plane to come here for Mum and Dad’s wedding. We came as friends, pretending to be in love, only I made a mistake,” Hiccup said. “And honestly, Mum, Dad, you both looked so happy that I couldn’t find it in myself to tell you the truth. So, I did something crazy.”

He swirled a tongue across his lips and took a breath before speaking again. “Love is in the little things. Love is knowing that there’s someone on the other end of the phone who’s always going to pick up. Love is knowing you’ve got someone who knows when you’re upset and turns up on your doorstep with alcohol and pineapple pizza – even if she thinks it tastes disgusting.” He gave a laugh. “Love is deciding to do something crazy like fake a relationship just because you know
it’ll make the other person happy. Not only that, but love isn’t like the movies at all. It can’t always be fixed with a grand gesture and big declaration. Love takes time, and patience, and honesty, and most of all, work.”

He took another long look at his parents. “By the end of the month, I realised that I had seen that kind of love before. I had seen all of those little things. I’d seen them in the best of people. I’d seen them in Mum and Dad,” he said, offering Stoick and Val a smile. Val smiled back, her eyes still wide.

Hiccup turned his gaze back towards the audience. “Love comes in the little things. Sometimes you’re not always listening,” he said. He focused on the audience and raised his glass. “I’m listening now.”

He turned his attention back to Stoick and Val. “So, let’s give it up for the very best of people, Stoick and Val Haddock!”

Everyone stood up and clapped. A few people were cheering. Snotlout had stood up on his chair and started whooping, and when Hiccup caught his eye, his cousin waved up at him, a shit-eating grin spread across his face. And when Hiccup turned, he saw his parents, standing up and clapping, his mother wiping away tears.

He went to them, and was pulled into his mother’s embrace before he managed to say a word.

“Was it a good speech?” he mumbled into Val’s ear.

“The best,” she said, holding him tight. “I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Mum.”

They both held on for a little longer before Hiccup let go and was swept into his father’s embrace.

“I’m so proud of you,” his father said, and Hiccup didn’t say anything, because he didn’t need to. He just buried his head into Stoick’s chest and squeezed.

They broke apart, and Hiccup was just about to say something else, when:

“That was one hell of a speech, Haddock.”

Hiccup turned, his heart in his throat.

Standing in the crowd, dressed in light blue, her hair coiled into a bun, was Astrid Hofferson.
“Hi,” Astrid said. “Sorry I’m late.”

Hiccup’s jaw dropped, his mouth wide open and gaping as he stared down at the crowd, blinking a few times to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

No, no, he wasn't. Astrid Hofferson was standing in the crowd, light blue dress on, blonde hair curled into a bun, strands of gold curling around her chin, and in that moment, Hiccup could have sworn that there was a light shining around where she stood, that the clouds had parted just for her.

For a moment he could do nothing but stare, frozen in space, and it took a few moments and a strong nudge from his father to get him to move. Behind him, Stoick and Val were exchanging wide smiles, and Stoick said something that sounded like "Go get her, kid!" but Hiccup barely heard. All he could think of in that moment was that Astrid was here, she was here on Berk and she was here at the wedding, and oh, God, she had heard all of his speech.

He stumbled down from his parents table, and as he moved, the earth seemed to fall away from him, everything around him turning into a blur as he focused on one thing and one thing only - Astrid.

And then he threw his arms around her, pulling her close and holding her tight, nearly knocking her backwards.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, his head pressed into her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

A smile tugged at the edge of Astrid's lips and she pulled him closer still, her arms threading through his and squeezing tight. "Hi, Hiccup."

"I didn't think you were - I didn't think I'd -" he said, his voice wobbling as his throat closed up and tears threatened to leak from his eyes. "I'm just so glad you're here."

They were still holding on tight to each other, like they were worried that if they didn't keep holding on, the other would just disappear.

"I know," Astrid said, softly. "I am too."

For a long moment, they were stationary, just clinging onto each other for dear life. Around them, the wedding guests hooted and clapped, and for once Hiccup found himself unable to care. What did it matter, anyway, when Astrid was here?

"I'm still furious with you," Astrid said into his ear.

Hiccup pulled back, let out a choke of a laugh while a few tears spilled down his face. "I know," he said, wiping his face with the back of his hand. "You should be."

"I shouldn't have left though," Astrid said, pushing her fringe out of her eyes before clutching her arm. "That was dumb."
Hiccup shook his head. "I'd have done what you did."

"No," Astrid said, quietly. "It didn't make sense for me to leave. I knew what I was walking out on, I should've stayed. Tried to sort it out. Look, Hiccup, we need to-"

“Astrid!”

She was cut off by Gobber’s voice, so loud above the crowd that people turned to stare at him. He marched through the swathes of people to clap his hands down onto Astrid’s shoulders. The poor girl shrank back.

“So wonderful that you came after all,” he said, “after everything that happened, we weren’t expecting you back. Poor Hiccup made a right mess of things, didn’t he?”

Hiccup flushed a bright red. “Not helping,” he muttered hotly.

Astrid was looking between Hiccup and Gobber as if all she wanted to do was run away. Gobber didn’t seem to notice.

“You really had become a part of the family, it would have been devastating if you hadn’t shown up.”

Hiccup wanted to sink into the ground, especially when he saw Astrid staring straight at her feet, fringe falling in front of her face. His eyes flickered up to the top table, and he shot a panicked look straight at his mother.

Val coughed, clapping Gobber on the shoulder. “Come have a drink with us, Gobber. We might not get another chance.”

She practically dragged him away, and Hiccup smiled gratefully at her. He and Astrid took the chance to scarper, disappearing into the crowd.

“Sorry about that,” he mumbled, staring at the floor.

“It’s alright,” she said, but it didn’t sound alright. “Look, Hiccup, we need to talk about-”

“Astrid! Hiccup!”

Astrid gave the barest sigh when she was interrupted again. This time it was a woman’s voice cutting through the crowd, and Heather came sauntering up to them.

“Well, Hiccup, this was definitely a surprise,” she said with a smirk, her eyes flickering between Hiccup and Astrid. “I’m almost disappointed. I thought for a moment, I had a chance.”

The last time Astrid had been on the receiving end of Heather’s flirting, she’d enjoyed it. Now, she just gave a polite smile, and looked uncomfortably down at her feet.

“Heather,” Hiccup said, the warning clear in his voice.

“Sorry,” Heather said, and the act shifted, her features softening. “I’m really happy for both of you. Don’t be strangers, you guys.”

Then she disappeared into the crowd.

Hiccup turned to Astrid as soon as she was gone. “I’m sorry, she has the worst timing. We really, really need to-"
It was Hiccup’s turn to be interrupted, this time by a figure bounding up towards them, and he tensed as he realised it was Snotlout barrelling into them. He shrank back as his cousin grabbed him by the shoulders, just like Astrid had with Gobber.

“Hiccup!” Snotlout said, “I’m glad I found you.”

Hiccup shot a confused look towards Astrid. “Er, you are?” he said, his eyes flickering between Snotlout and Astrid, backing away from him. Astrid was clutching her arm, staring at the floor, and Hiccup desperately tried send her a telepathic apology.

“Yeah, look,” Snotlout said, rolling his shoulders back and forth uncomfortably. “I need to apologise to you.”

Hiccup blinked. “Apologise?”

Snotlout shifted under Hiccup’s gaze. “Look, I’ve given you a lot of shit over the years for a lot of stuff,” he began, “especially about stuff involving relationships. I know that’s caused a few problems for you—” he glanced over at Astrid—“and I know I took it too far. I think it was because there were a few things I haven’t wanted to admit. Mostly stuff about myself, and other people.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

Snotlout sighed, and took a look over his shoulder into the crowd behind him. “Hey, Fishlegs!” he called. “Get over here.”

“Like I said,” Snotlout began again, as Fishlegs bounded over. “There are things I haven’t wanted to admit about myself.”

Fishlegs reached the group. “Hey,” he said, his gaze on Snotlout. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Snotlout said, and broke out into a smile. “I’m alright.”

Hiccup watched the exchange, and looked down in astonishment as he saw Fishlegs and Snotlout link their fingers together. His eyes shot back up to his cousin’s face. For a moment, the irritation at being interrupted melted away, and he simply gaped up at Snotlout, mouth dropping open.

“You-” he said, his voice stopping short as he broke out into a smile.

“I’m bisexual,” Snotlout said, running an uncomfortable hand through his hair. “Sorry I let it get to me.”

Hiccup blinked, still smiling madly, completely lost for words. Snotlout frowned and waved a hand in front of his head. “Er, Hiccup? You okay? You’re starting to creep me out.”

Hiccup broke out of his reverie and pulled a shocked Snotlout into a hug.

“I’m sorry too,” Hiccup said. “I never wanted to make you feel like you couldn’t tell me things.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Snotlout muttered, “get off me.”

He made a disgusted face, but after a few moments, Hiccup felt him hug back. It was an apology, and it was forgiveness, all rolled into one, and most of all, it felt like another hole in his heart had been healed.

It was time to patch the rest of his heart up.

Getting time alone to talk proved much harder than either Hiccup or Astrid had anticipated.
Getting time alone to talk proved much harder than either Hiccup or Astrid had anticipated. Around every corner there was someone that wanted to pull Hiccup aside to talk about the wedding, and congratulate him on such a moving speech, and nod and wink at Astrid until they were both desperate for some private time. Astrid was growing tired about the constant, wink-wink nudge-nudge that everyone seemed to think was appropriate, and just as someone turned on some loud music and everyone gravitated towards the dance floor, she took the moment to slip away. Hiccup, whose back had been turned for mere moments, felt his heart sink as he looked around to find her missing.

It took him a while to find her. In the end, it was one of the guests who pointed towards the beach and said that she’d gone in that direction.

The beach was empty. Almost everyone on the island was at the wedding reception, and though he could still hear the music from the party way off in the distance, the beach was mostly quiet except for the faint lapping of the waves hitting the shore.

Astrid was sitting in the sand, her legs tucked up by her chest, her dress bunched up around them, leaving her knees bare. Hiccup hovered behind and watched her for few moments, before he joined her on the floor.

"Your dress is going to get filthy," he said.

Astrid frowned. The wind lapped at her, and she pushed strands of hair out of face.

"It’s just a bit of sand,” she said.

Hiccup looked down at his feet, picked up a stone from amongst the sand, and threw it out to sea. “We need to talk,” he said.

“We do,” Astrid said.

And then the two of them fell silent, both of them staring down at their feet.

Astrid ran her tongue across her bottom lip, and took a breath. “There’s something I need to ask you.”

“Yes,” Hiccup said. “Anything.”

"Back before the reunion," she began, clearing her throat, "why didn't you just ask me to be your date for real? Why did you have to complicate things so much?"

"Because I didn't think," he said. "You were my friend, Astrid, my best friend in the world. That was so important to me, I couldn't even comprehend being anything else."

"I didn't think that you might possibly feel the same way?"
"No," Hiccup said, staring at his fingers. "I wish it had."

There was a long awkward silence between the two of them. They just sat together in the sand, not quite touching, while the waves lapped against the shore, in a comforting rhythm, the sea a dark colour under the night sky. Astrid stared for a long time out towards the waves, watching them move back and forth. Hiccup watched her, carefully.

“I don’t think I’ve ever talked about my leg with you,” Hiccup said.

Astrid eyes flickered up at him. “You don’t like to talk about it.”

Hiccup nodded. “I don’t like talking about it because it was a stupid way to lose it,” he said, and then took a breath. “It was just a busy road, and I was distracted, and I wasn’t looking where I was going. If I’d just looked, I might still have it.” He stared at the ground. “After that, any shred of confidence I had was gone. I felt like everyone was looking at me funny, all the time, like they pitied me. And after a while, I really hated myself. I didn’t feel good enough for anybody, which is why romantic relationships never really worked out for me. So, when it came to you, somebody I really cared about, I convinced myself that there was no way you’d ever like me back,” he said, and swallowed. “So, I made the decision for you and I shouldn’t have done. I’m sorry.”

Astrid nodded, and stared at the ground for a while.

“My Dad left my Mum at the altar when I was eleven,” she said.

Hiccup blinked. It was not the response he had expected. “I know that.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to be there,” Astrid said, staring straight into the sand instead of at him, “it was horrible. It was like watching my mother’s heart break in real time, and then she had to pretend that she was perfectly okay, for my sake. And she wasn’t okay. I didn’t really realise what was happening as a child, but now, I remember all of these times when I heard her crying alone in her room. Sometimes she would just stare straight into space. And it was scary, because my mother had always been the strongest person I knew. The idea of her falling apart just wasn’t something I could comprehend: but what was worse was the idea that someone could do that to a person. That someone you loved could hurt you so very much.” Astrid took a breath out, looked up at the sky for a few moments, and then back down at her feet. “I promised myself then, that it wouldn’t happen to me. I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt me like that. Nobody was going to get to me like that.”

Hiccup pressed his lips together and stared at his feet.

“When you asked me to fake it with you, I didn’t think it’d get to me the way it did,” Astrid said, trailing her fingers through the sand. “I protested at first because, really, Hiccup, this was not the simplest solution to your problem—” Hiccup ducked his head and smiled sheepishly— “but deep down, I was kind of happy to spend time with you. I was always happiest when I was with you, especially when you were happy. And the way you looked at me when I agreed to do it was just too much, it was like it was your birthday and I’d just given you the best birthday present you could think of. So, I went along with it.”

Hiccup scratched the back of his head and went on listening.

“You don’t realise how great you are,” Astrid said, a ghost of a smile on her lips. “You don’t realise how smart, and kind, and funny you are. And you were one of the few people who really understood me—” she brushed her fringe out of her face— “which is why it hurt so much when you started pushing me away. And I knew that there was a reason for it that I didn’t understand, and I knew I should have just talked to you about it, but all that fear bubbled up again and I wasn’t
going to let myself get hurt,” she said. “And a part of me was really frustrated. You’d built up your parents to be scary monsters, when actually they’re wonderful people.”

The guilt burned in Hiccup’s throat. “I know.”

“And you’re so lucky in lots of ways,” Astrid said. “You have a family who really love you. You’d never have to worry about money if you asked them. Back at the reunion I was standing in your parent’s home thinking that they must be awful if you were willing to turn your back on them, but they weren’t.”

He hung his head. “I know. I’m sorry. I don’t have the words to tell you how sorry I am.”

She sighed, and stared at the sea again, watching the waves move back and forth. A minute passed. And then another. And another. Then she smiled at him. “Alright,” she said. “I forgive you.”

Hiccup blinked. “Just like that?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Hiccup, look, I’m not going to pretend that what you did didn’t suck. Because it did. But I didn’t come back here just to drag you through the mud. I care about you, Hiccup, a hell of a lot, and I don’t want that to change just because of bad communication.” She smiled, a little wider this time, and held out her little finger to him. “Just promise me that from now on, you’ll tell me what you’re thinking.”

Hiccup curled his pinkie around hers. “Deal.”

“Good,” she said.

Then she hopped to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Hiccup said, staring up at her.

"I'm going in."

"You're what?"

Hiccup didn't get an answer though, because Astrid was already running, full pelt towards the sea, splashing through the waves until she was waist deep in water, her dress soaked. She waved and called over to him.

Hiccup stood up slowly, hovering in the sand, unsure of what to do. Then, with a sigh, he began pulling off his jacket and his tie, running into the water with her.

"It. Is. So. Cold," he mumbled, his teeth chattering as he waded over towards her.

"Coward," she said, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight, lifting up her hands to splash him.

"Hey!" he covered his face with his hands. And then he said it again, his voice a little softer. “If I’m going to promise to tell you everything I’m thinking, I need to put my cards on the table, properly.”

Hiccup's fingers caught hers before she could splash her again. He gently pulled her towards him until the two were facing each other, just a metre away.

"I'm in love with you," he said, his fingers barely brushing hers. "Ever since the reunion, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. It's not just a silly crush - more like I don't know what I'd do
if you stopped being in my life. I love you, Astrid, so much that it hurts, and if you’ll let me, I will spend the rest of my life by your side."

There was a long pause. Astrid’s breath hitched as they moved closer and closer, until they were mere inches apart, her lips hover just over his. All she’d have to do is move the smallest bit, and they’d be kissing.

Instead, she put two hands on his chest and pushed him into the water.

Hiccup flailed and splashed, before standing up on his feet, his clothes soaked through and his hair sopping. Astrid cackled wildly, doubling over while her shoulders shook.

"You're evil," Hiccup muttered, wiping his hair out of his face. "I thought we were having a moment."

"Sorry," she wheezed, still doubled over, finding it hard to breathe between giggles. "I'm sorry - I just - "

Whatever she was going to say was lost as a new wave of giggles hit her, tears streaming from her eyes.

"You're actually the worst person," Hiccup said, pulling a piece of seaweed out from his hair. "I take it all back. This is what I get. I'm trying to confess my love here, and you're just-"

Whatever he was about to say was interrupted when she took his hand and pull him towards her, letting go so that she could cup his face and kiss him.

She was still giggling while kissing him, her arms wrapping around him. Hiccup's hands slid up her back to pull her closer to him.

"I love you too, Hiccup," she said. "I have for a long time. I just... needed to hear you say it first. I needed to know that you were serious."

“I have-” Hiccup said, in between kisses – “Never been-” Another kiss – “Any more serious-” – one more kiss – “Than I am about you.”

Hiccup pulled back after that, and took in Astrid’s face, her blonde hair dark with the water and bedraggled around her chin, blue eyes sparkling, and a grin stretched from ear to ear. Her arms were wrapped around him and they were so close together that even in the darkness he could make out patterns in her eyes, like they had constellations of their own.

“So, will you be my girlfriend for real, this time?” he said.

Astrid let out a laugh and looked down at feet before looking up at Hiccup again. “What do you think?” she said, giving him a gentle shove.

Hiccup grinned, green eyes bright under the moonlight. “I was just making sure.”

Astrid didn’t reply, she just pulled him in for another kiss.
They left the beach with their hands tangled together, fingers interlocked, as close to each other as they could get, Astrid’s head rested in the crook of Hiccup’s neck. The music back at the reception had slowed down, people had moved to take hold of their respective partners, swaying gently to the rhythm. The barn was lit up by fairy lights, the white silk that Astrid had thrown over the rafters practically glowing in the light.

Hiccup’s parents were in the centre, holding close to each other as they danced, acting as if all the world was no longer there. People’s heads turned, however, when Hiccup and Astrid entered, and Hiccup knew in that moment they had been the subject of all the town’s gossip. Stoick tore his eyes away from Val and noticed Hiccup and Astrid in the doorway. He gave them a nod, and looked at them expectantly, asking a question with his eyes.

Hiccup wrapped his arm around Astrid’s waist and pulled her close, the smile on his face strong enough to light up the whole room.

A grin spread across Stoick’s features.

All the guests seemed to have noticed too, because all at once, a cheer rang out through the barn. Astrid pressed her smile into Hiccup’s shoulder, and Hiccup’s cheeks turned pink from all the attention. For once, though, he was happy for it to be on him. In this moment, with his heart beating wildly in his chest, he would have been happy to shout it to the whole world that he was in love with Astrid Hofferson, and Astrid Hofferson was in love with him. The world was slowly sliding back into place.

When the attention finally lifted off them, Hiccup offered his hand to Astrid. “Care for a dance, Miss Hofferson?”

“How could I refuse, Mr Haddock?”

They spun around together on the dance floor, laughing into each other’s shoulders as they stepped on each other’s toes; Astrid at least managing to be graceful while Hiccup was all limb. She mumbled words to him, telling him where to put his feet as they danced, but it was no use; Hiccup’s dancing skills were catastrophic.

She let out another laugh, her eyes glittering, and Hiccup didn’t care that she was laughing at him, he just basked in it, thinking to himself that if he could spend the rest of his life making Astrid Hofferson laugh like that, then he could die happy.

“You’re still horrible at this,” Astrid said, still smiling.

“I know,” Hiccup said. “Do you want to stop?”

"No."

“Me neither.”
Eventually, they did stop, both of them gasping for breath. They were the second-to-last off the
dance floor, beaten only by Stoick and Val, who seemed not to suffer from aching legs or sore
toes, too lost in each other to care. Hiccup and Astrid stumbled over towards the tables, dropping
down into chairs and nursing their sore feet.

“Well, that’s officially more exercise than I’ve done in years,” Hiccup muttered, tipping his head
back against the back of the chair.

ostrich.”

“Don’t be mean to me,” Hiccup whined, screwing his eyes shut and tipping his head back. “I’m
too tired to think of a comeback.”

Astrid laughed again, and Hiccup felt his insides fill with a delicious warmth that he couldn’t quite
get enough of.

“Alright, no more dancing,” she said, and pulled him up out of the chair, looping her arms easily
with his. “but you promised me that this would be worse than the reunion, I want to see this for
myself. Introduce me to some people, and I’ll try and keep a straight face while you tell me their
names.”

Hiccup craned his neck and scanned the crowd. "Snotlout has a friend named Dogsbreath."

"Well, now you're just making this up."

"I am not!"

"Who in their right minds would willingly let themselves be nicknamed Dogsbreath?!!" Astrid
said, trying to keep the laugh out of her voice.

"You'll believe it when you see him," Hiccup muttered. "He's that sort of guy."

"This entire family is mad," Astrid said. "Completely mad."

Hiccup grinned. "You haven't even seen the half of it."

He let himself be swept up by Astrid into the crowd, ready to mingle with the other guests.

They did indeed meet Dogsbreath, and he was as unpleasant as his name. After a few short grunts
from him and thinly veiled insults, Hiccup found himself whisking Astrid away as quickly as
possible. Dogsbreath’s tendency for the unkind couldn’t bring Hiccup down for long, though;
he’d been on a high for the past few hours and he never wanted to come down.

He and Astrid met guest after guest, and this time, it wasn’t uncomfortable when they cooed and
asked probing questions. For the first time, they found themselves blissfully happy with the
attention. They fielded question after question, even managed to dodge the really personal ones
without descending into blushes, and all the while, they never let go of the other’s hand.

At one point, they noticed Alvin sitting at table, glaring at them. Astrid put on her sweetest smile
and waved at him. His stink-eye shot daggers at them all the way across the room, before he
stormed off out the door. Hiccup held in a laugh.

The best came with Old Wrinkly. He gave the couple the brightest smile, eyes twinkling under the
lights.

“I knew you’d work things out,” he said.

Hiccup scowled. “You said it was improbable.”

“Not improbable,” Old Wrinkly said, eyes still shining. “Inevitable.”

Hiccup couldn’t help himself then, he stepped forward and threw his arms around his grandfather, squeezing him tight. There was something about today that made Hiccup really want to take each of his family members and pull them into the biggest hug.

It really was a good day for love.

In this moment, Astrid thought to herself, nothing could be more perfect.

Hiccup was happy, his eyes were warm and bright, and he’d been smiling more than she’d ever seen him smile. And, she realised as she sat quietly watching the wedding wind down, that she had never been happier either. She was settled in the corner of the barn, sitting at one of the tables with a glass of champagne, contentedly watching as Stoick and Val circled the floor again.

Hiccup has been gone a while. He’d excused himself a while back, disappearing out into the darkness outside the barn, and she hadn’t seen him since. She’d only just begun to wonder where he’d gone, when he came barrelling back into the room, grinning madly, eyes lit with the kind of mischievous glee that Astrid had often seen whenever Hiccup was causing trouble.

“Astrid,” he said, swallowing a laugh. “C’mere.”

She followed him out the room, and watched as he fell apart into giggles once they’d left the barn. “Hiccup?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Toothless,” he said, clutching his stomach. He was grinning so hard his cheeks must have been aching, and when he managed to speak, his tone was utterly gleeful. “He’s-” his sentence was interrupted as he spluttered into laughter again— “well, he’s done a poo in Alvin’s hat.”

That sentence was so nonsensical that Astrid spluttered, her hand covering her face. “He’s done what?”

“He’s-”

Hiccup didn’t get to finish his sentence. They were interrupted by a roar of, “HICCUP HADDOCK!”

The two jumped, and saw the figure of Alvin storming up towards them, barely a shadow in the dim light. As he got closer, his face was illuminated by the outside lights, his eyebrows screwed together and his eyes flashing in the darkness. He looked furious.

“C’mon,” he said, still laughing as he grabbed hold of her hand, and pulled her away.

The two ran, still giggling as they heard Alvin scream abuse from behind them – “I’ll get you Hiccup Haddock! You better watch yourself!”-all the way back to his parents’ home, where Toothless was waiting on the porch, licking his paw rather proudly.

“Good boy,” Hiccup said, sounding positively delighted, still trying to hold in giggles while he scratched behind Toothless’ ears. “Good cat. Best cat.”
Astrid looked down at the boy she loved so very much, a smile stretching across her face as she said, “do you think he put it on?”

The look in Hiccup’s eye was so hopeful that Astrid dropped to the floor laughing, her hands pressed over her face, as she giggled so hard that tears streamed out of her eyes.

Yeah. It was a good day.

As the night slipped on, and finally, the last of the wedding guests trickled home, Hiccup and Astrid found themselves back at the house, feet sore from the dancing, barely able to keep their eyes open, but wonderfully, blissfully happy. As they trailed up to Hiccup’s room, he realised the best thing about finally being together: he no longer had to worry about sleeping arrangements. For all this time, he’d constantly been worried about stepping on Astrid’s toes regarding the bed. He worried all the time about rolling into her, about waking up entangled in her limbs, and then having to detract himself in the morning and pretend he hadn’t been enjoying it.

Now, when they slipped into bed, Hiccup was free to pull her close and wrap his arms around her. Astrid bent her head into the crook of his neck, her blonde hair tickling his skin, the smell of her shampoo filling his nose. Her fingers curled around his chest, and she leaned up to kiss him gently.

“I love you,” she mumbled into his skin.

“I love you too,” he whispered, and wondered how he’d managed to get so lucky.

Tomorrow, they’d fly home, back to the city, back to their normal lives. Whatever the new normal was, Hiccup was looking forward to it whole-heartedly. A world where he was allowed to hold Astrid in his arms and kiss her whenever he liked, was a world he never wanted to leave.

The next morning they woke up tangled together, and neither moved away.

It wasn’t perfect.

It took talking, so many late-night conversations where truths were admitted, and insecurities were shed, sometimes ending in kisses and cuddles, other times with tears and hand holding. There were arguments too, days when the tiffs were bad, and doors were left slammed, but they always made up the next morning, and their relationship was stronger because of it.

The road to happily ever after was paved in good communication and understanding.

A month after the wedding, Hiccup and Astrid found themselves standing on the doorstep of his parents’ second home, back on the mainland. Hiccup had a hand on Astrid’s back – it had already become so natural for him - and the two smiled as they waited for Stoick to open the door.

It was the first of the weekly family meals Hiccup had promised to his father, and, to his surprise, he had found himself really looking forward to it. The hole in the relationship between Hiccup and his father had slowly been mended, and he found that after a while, all that dread he’d had about seeing his father had simply melted away.

“Your tie isn’t straight,” Astrid commented, just as the door opened.

Stoick opened the door to see Hiccup elbowing Astrid in the side. He beamed down at the two of
“Had enough of each other already?”

Astrid’s eyes shone as she flashed Stoick a smile, looping her arm through Hiccup’s. “Never,” she said, ruffling his hair. “I’m too fond of him.”

Hiccup grinned. It didn’t matter how many times he heard it, it still made his insides turn to mush.

“How have you been?” Stoick said, as he shut the door behind them, ushering them both into the hallway, “how’s having a real relationship treating you?”

Hiccup scowled at his father, but Astrid smiled as she bent her head to rest it on Hiccup’s shoulder, her hand sliding down to lock fingers with him. “It’s been fantastic. How was the honeymoon?”

“Delightful!” Val said, as she hurried out of the kitchen to grab hold of Astrid and kiss her on the cheek. “It’s so lovely to see you two again, come in, come, come, I’m sure you haven’t eaten properly in the last month, come and get a proper meal…”

Hiccup and Astrid caught each other’s eye and grinned.

“Better than you’d think,” Astrid said, and then her voice became somewhat peeved, “he doesn’t let me anywhere near a kitchen.”

“Astrid, you are smart, beautiful, and talented at many, many things,” Hiccup said, “but your cooking is more effective than cyanide.”

Astrid elbowed him in the ribs – “hey, it’s not like it isn’t true!” – while Stoick guffawed and Val hid a smile behind her hand.

“Just like your mother,” Stoick said, looking down at Val with a fond smile, “one hour in a kitchen and she could bring down whole cities.”

It was Val’s turn to act annoyed, whipping Stoick with the end of a tea-cloth.

Stoick smiled, eyes glowing as he looked at his wife. “It’s like Hiccup said—” he pulled her towards him and pressed a kiss to her cheek— “Smart, beautiful, talented – but no cooking ability whatsoever.”

Val swatted at him, but she was smiling the whole time, and she let herself be pulled into a kiss.

“So,” Astrid said, as they settled down to dinner (thankfully prepared by Stoick), “what’s new with you two? What’s happening now that the honeymoon is all over?”

“Y’know, moving on to new pastures, thinking about new job opportunities,” Stoick said, and then gave a pointed look at Val’s stomach. “New family members.”

Hiccup spat out his drink.


He stopped when he saw that his parents were laughing.

“One was enough, Hiccup, really,” Val said.

“You caused us all sorts of trouble,” Stoick said.
“We were thinking of getting a dog,” Val added, an amused smile on her face.

Hiccup, meanwhile, was almost hyperventilating, wiping spittle off his face, his mouth still gaping open. “Don’t do that,” he said, “there are only so many surprises I can take!”

Astrid let out a giggle, and soon his parents joined in, and Hiccup couldn’t help himself, the laughter was infectious. The whole group was laughing, and that was how the night continued, with laughter and jokes, and conversation. Looking around at the group, Hiccup thought to himself that he’d never met finer people, and he wondered how he’d let himself drive such a wedge between him and his parents, and why he’d ever done it.

They were, after all, two of the best people around.

FIVE YEARS LATER

The summer had been a hot one, and the days had been lazy.

When Stoick and Val had offered them a holiday out on the Isle of Berk, Hiccup and Astrid had graciously accepted. Hiccup’s parents had moved back to the island, after much begging on Val’s part - the island was her home, her true home, and now that she trusted that Hiccup was in good hands, she no longer felt the need to be constantly checking on him, but she’d demanded that he visit Berk often - “I’ll pay for your flights, just as long as you come as see me as much as possible, and bring Astrid too!”

Hiccup and Astrid had decided to spend the whole summer there, staying in Hiccup’s childhood home. Both of them worked freelance now, so the need to stay in the city wasn’t as strong, and so, for a blissful three months, they spent their time on the beach, or revisiting old haunts.

On their last night before they went home, they’d found themselves on the beach, the very same place where they’d finally told each other how they felt. That night, as the sun slipped down below the horizon, they watched as the sea kissed the shoreline, reflecting the last dregs of summer into the air.

“Hey, Hiccup,” Astrid said, her voice quiet amongst the gentle sound of the waves splashing back and forth. “Will you marry me?”

fin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, so, so, so, much if you've been following this fic from the beginning! And thank you so much if you're a new reader, or anything in between. I never thought I'd get to the end, but here we are!

- QueenoftheWilderwest
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