Your Father and Mine

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Summary

They weren't actually a secret, but America just never bothered to bring up the fact that he had fifty children. Naturally, it was bound to come out sooner or later that the states were personified; America just wishes it could've happened with fewer death threats. The nations won't know what hit them. And, in the process, other secrets from America's past are brought to light.

Notes

Here's my first ever Hetalia fanfic. The original can be found on my FanFiction account, under Redbayly, and it's already twenty-eight chapters in, but I wanted to upload it here, as well.
I don't own Hetalia. I only own my interpretations of the states, though I have drawn influence from other people's state fics. The portrayals in this story are not meant to cause offence, but there will be occasional inclusion of somewhat sensitive historical/social/political topics.
America tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for the last speaker to finish and checked his watch for the hundredth time. He really needed to get out of there, and soon. He was already supposed to be on his way, and, if he stayed much longer, his phone would start blowing up. Plus, when he finally did get to where he was supposed to be, he was going to get chewed out for being late. Just as he feared, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket.

He quietly pulled it out and held it under the table as he read the first messages.

*Where the fuck r u, Dad! U said u'd b here!*

- *Mark*

*Daddy, please get here! Mark's going apeshit! You know what he's like in baseball season!*

- *Elsie*

America couldn't help but curse under his breath. It was another infamous baseball season. While America wasn't supposed to support any one team over another, as he didn't want to show favoritism, he had promised New York and New Jersey to sit with the Yankees fans this go around (and, man, had he had to apologize to Massachusetts, who had screamed and cried for hours before putting on a mask of indifference and making passive-aggressive comments that America would've more readily expected from the Southerns).


"Can't," said America. "I'm late for another meeting."

"You shouldn't make plans during world conference days. It's your own bloody fault."

"But it couldn't be any other day."

"What's so bloody important that you -?"

"Will you two cease the chit-chat back there?!" came Germany's sharp voice. "Someone has the floor!"

"Sorry, but can I be excused?" said America.
"Nein! We must all stay until the end of the meeting!"

"But, it's really, really, really important."

"Nein! You will remain in your seat."

"But, you don't understand."

"Silence!"

America shrank back in his chair while many of the other nations snickered at him. Damn it, they didn't know what they were getting themselves into. He'd never allowed one of his meetings to coincide with something as important as a Yankees vs Red Sox game. He wasn't suicidal after all. And, if New York wasn't in the stadium soon, things could turn very ugly very fast. America scanned the room for a quick exit; it was the only chance of saving everyone from the hellfire that would rain down on them.

Aha! Someone left the window open, he thought with satisfaction. Granted it's a ten story drop, but it's a better alternative than New York storming in here.

His mind made up, America jumped from his seat and charged for the window with a cry of "FREEDOM!" Only to be grabbed by the back of his jacket by an irate Germany.

"What do you think you are doing?!" Germany shouted.

"Let me go!" America cried out. "I'm trying to save you idiots! Do you have any idea what you could unleash on us all?!!"

"What are you -?"

But that was as far as he got. Suddenly, the room began to shake.

"Oh no, I'm too late," America said fearfully.

"Ve~! Germany, I'm scared!" cried Italy.

"Vas ist das?" said Germany.

"It's too late," said America. "You've unleashed him."

Before anyone could say anything else, the doors to the conference room were sent flying off their hinges and a dark fog materialized. From out of the midst of it came the figure of a teenage boy, maybe seventeen at most. He was somewhat unusual in appearance. His skin was a somewhat olive tone, making him look neither white nor specifically any other ethnicity. His amber eyes were thin and stern. Over his dark brown hair was an 'I Love New York' baseball cap. He was also decked out in attire that clearly indicated he supported the New York Yankees.

"Hey, Dad," the boy said coldly to America. "You're late."

"Sorry, kiddo," America said. "The meeting was running a bit long. But, I'm free to go now."

Germany, not realizing what the problem was, though surprised that the boy had just called America "Dad," was not going to permit more disruptions.

"I don't know who you are," Germany said. "But we are still in the middle of our conference. You will have to wait until." Again, Germany was cut off. This time by the teenage boy grabbing him by
the front of his suit, dragging him to the window, and holding him at the edge.

"The game starts in ten minutes," the boy said in a deathly calm voice. "If I am even one second late to it-" He released his hold on Germany for half a second, causing the nation to start falling backwards through the open window, beforegrabbing his tie to prevent him from dropping. "You get the picture."

Germany looked quickly around the now-terrified room for anyone willing to help him. Finding none and seeing the murderous intent in the boy's eyes, which seemed to be filled with an unholy fire, he knew he had no choice.

"America, you are dismissed," he said.

The boy pulled Germany back into the room and dropped him rather forcefully to the floor. The boy then practically dragged America out the door. The silence they left in their wake was like a lead weight over the confused and fear-stricken nations.

The next day, America cheerfully strolled into the conference room and was surprised to see everyone already there and staring at him intently.

"'Sup, dudes?" America said brightly. "Sorry about that business yesterday."

"America," said Germany in a serious but slightly cautious tone, "who was that boy who tried to drop me from the window last night?"

"Hm? Oh, that was New York."

England was the first to react.

"What the bloody hell do you mean that was 'New York'?!" he screamed.

America just quirked an eyebrow in response.

"You know, he's New York. One of my states."

Everyone exchanged surprised looks, which just served to confound America further. Why on earth were they acting like it was such a big deal?

"Amérique, mon ami," France said, "do you mean to say that your states have personifications?"

"Well, yeah. But it's not like that's odd. I'm sure you guys all have your own states and provinces with personifications, right?"

"Well," said Germany, "some of us used to, but they often ended up vanishing when they joined to form unified countries."

"What? That's crazy. Stop saying crazy stuff, Germany."

"I am serious, America. And, if your states are personified, why did that one last night call you 'Dad'?"

"Well, because I'm his father, duh."

"What do you mean you're his father?!" England shouted again.
"Um…Just what it sounds like?"

"Ohonhonhon," France replied. "America, you have certainly been busy, then. You do have fifty states, do you not?"

"Well, it's not like I knew it would happen or anything."

"You still fathered fifty children!" said England. "How is that even possible?!"

"I am so proud of you, Amérique," France added with a teary-eyed smile. "How many lovely ladies did you entice into your bed to get such a wealth of les enfants?"

America looked rather uncomfortable with that question and there was a faint flicker of sadness that passed through his eyes.

"Two," came a sharp voice from further up the table.

All heads turned towards where a sultry young woman sat. Her skin was a soft mocha brown and her hair was such a shade of black that there was a blue tint to it where the light hit. Her brown eyes were keen and sharp.

"Hey, Mexico," America said awkwardly. She hadn't been at last night's meeting, though someone must have filled her in on what happened because she hadn't been surprised by the other nations' interrogation of America.

"America," she said stiffly. "How are my Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico?"

"They're fine."

Mexico gave a curt nod.

Spain's eyes went wide and he looked from Mexico to America and then back to Mexico in disbelief. His little Mexico had been involved with America and had children, and Spain hadn't heard one word of this?! If he wasn't collapsed in his chair from shock, he would probably be trying to throttle America.

"So, you and Mexico…?" England said, more calmly this time.

There was definitely some awkward tension as America and Mexico stared each other down. Mexico had a kind of sad, almost hurt look and America's expression was strangely unreadable. Something had happened between the neighboring countries and it had definitely been something painful.

"That is in the past," said America.

Mexico gave an angry huff and turned away from him.

"Well, if Mexico is the mother of five of your states," England continued, "who is the mother of the rest?"

"None of your business," America said with unusual harshness. Everyone looked at him in amazement. America almost never lost his temper. He could be loud, obnoxious, and arrogant, but he was rarely ever truly angry at anyone. Even his relationship with Russia was more a kind of love-hate rivalry that only simmered a bit these days, but never descended to any real anger (well, unless Russia did something to genuinely hurt one of America's friends; then the rage came out).
America must have realized how that statement had come across and took a deep, calming breath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I do not want to talk about that. And, even then, not all my states even have a biological mother."

"So they just appeared like countries do?" said Germany.

"I'm not exactly sure. I just remember, after the Revolution ended and Congress was making plans to recognize the states, I started feeling really sick and dizzy all the time. Then, the day that they officially designated Delaware the first state, I had this splitting headache and passed out. When I woke up there was a baby lying next to me. And that's how it went on for a while.

"Look, guys, I still don't get what the big deal is. I know I'm not the only one with kids who personify states and provinces and stuff."

"America-san is correct," said Japan. "My prefectures all have personifications. But they are not children, though."

"Well, Canada and Mexico both have their own kids back at their homes."

"Mexico and who...?" just about everyone said simultaneously.

"I'm Canada," said a quiet voice.

"Guys, he is literally sitting right there," America said, pointing to his northern twin.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" said France, his attention now focused on Canada. "Mon petit Canada, you are a papa and you didn't tell moi?"

Canada sank low into his chair. For the first time ever, he wished he could stay invisible. Unlike America, he had purposefully refrained from bringing up the existence of his children because he sincerely was trying to keep them hidden from the outside world. Unfortunately, America had just ruined that secret. Mexico, too, had been hoping to keep her children secret, because she didn't want Spain prying into her personal life. The two of them realized they probably should have clarified things with America instead of assuming he would realize the importance of such a secret; he did have a tendency to blab about things he wasn't specifically told he couldn't talk about.

"Seriously," said America, "I don't get what's so weird about this."

"Why haven't we met any of your states before now?" said England.

"I just thought it was something nations don't talk about. I mean, Canada and I talk about it, because we're bros and our kids like to hang out together now and then. I guess I figured you all just didn't like to bring up your own children in conversation. Seems I was wrong.

"Look, maybe it will be easier to explain if I have one of the kids present. I'll just call New York and ask him to come back in. I want him to apologize for his behavior anyway."

Germany looked like he'd rather eat a bucket of broken glass and rusty nails than see the personification of New York ever again. The other countries were similarly wary. However, America had already sent the text and it was too late to stop him.

Not ten seconds later, there was a knock on the door to the conference room, which had been reattached before the meeting. America smiled and stood up to answer it while the other countries looked at each other in disbelief. There was no way that kid could've gotten there so quickly, right?
However, when America opened the door, there was the same teenager from last night, looking noticeably calmer, much to everyone’s relief.

"Hey, kiddo," America said. "Thanks for dropping by."

"Yeah, yeah, old man," New York said. "Can we get this over with? I got two business meetings, a dozen resumes to look over, lunch with the mayor, about twenty different other things, and then dinner with an up-and-comin' Broadway star to get to. So, let's make this quick, a'ight?"

"Sure. Everyone, this is Markus Alexander Jones, the state of New York."

"Yo, Pops, I toldja, it's just Mark these days."

Just then, there was the sound of a phone ringing. New York held up a finger to indicate everyone should be quiet as he pulled out a cellphone and began to chat heatedly with someone on the other end. In Mandarin Chinese. He must have also been saying some rather vulgar things as China looked mortified and not a little frightened. New York seemed to be getting angrier and angrier, causing the countries to slowly sink under the tables where they were seated to avoid drawing his attention. Finally, in a fit of rage, he yanked off his trademark baseball cap and threw it to the ground. This would not have drawn more than a little bit of notice, had the cap’s removal not revealed that New York’s dark brown hair was styled in a very familiar, spiky coiffure.

New York managed to calm down enough to end his conversation and close his phone with a sharp snap.

"Fuckin' shysters," he muttered before turning back to the countries. "Anyway, sorry I freaked you guys out yesterday. But, let it be a lesson to you, never stand between me and somethin' I want."

"York," America cautioned.

"Fine. Sorry you guys are such pussies that-"

"York, I mean it, you're not leaving until you give a real apology."

"Ugh. Okay, okay. God, you're such a klootzak."

Netherlands, who had been smoking his pipe (against meeting regulations), suddenly inhaled sharply and began coughing as he caught that last, rather crass word spoken in his own language. When he'd gotten the little fit of smoke inhalation-related breathing disruption sorted, he looked very closely at New York. At first glance, Netherlands had seen nothing in the youth's appearance that he considered familiar. However, the removal of the cap left not only the boy's hairstyle (almost exactly like Netherlands' own) visible, it made it easier to make out smaller details in the shape of his face and the sharp, stern curve of his brow that showed an unmistakable familial connection to the Netherlands.

That was when Netherlands remembered. A colony of his own that he'd dedicated so much time, effort, money, and, dare he say, a degree of affection into making only to end up losing it all to England when he could no longer afford to keep it. The all-but outright theft of his New Netherland had been one of the reasons why the Netherlands had been so quick to recognize America as an independent nation when the boy had separated from England.

"A'ight, I'm really sorry I freaked you all out," the boy repeated. "And I'm sorry I nearly threw that guy out the window." He pointed to Germany as he said that. "I'll try not to let it happen again."

"That's all I ask," said America.
"Can I go now, Pops? Time is money, after all."

Netherlands felt an unusual sensation in his chest. Was that what having pride in someone else felt like?

"Sure, sure. And keep your eye on Wall Street. Last thing we need is another stock market crash."

"For fuck's sake, Dad, now I'm not gonna sleep because you put that thought in my head!"

New York now seemed to be rather panicked and whipped out another phone, which he stared at as if it were a time bomb.

"The DOW is up. It's still up. God, no! It just dropped an eighth of a percent. Now it's up again. Still up. God damn it! Stop going down! Okay, it's stabilized."

"Run along, you neurotic, little mogul."

New York turned, picked up his discarded cap from the floor, and left the room, still staring and screaming at the stock app on his phone. America just shook his head fondly and looked back at the other nations, who seemed almost as shell-shocked as they had been the previous evening.

"Yeah, New York's always been a bit high-strung," he said. "And be thankful he was in such a good mood."

"That was a good mood, aru?" said China in disbelief.

"Of course that was a good mood. After all, the Yankees beat the Red Sox last night. If they'd lost, New York would've probably knifed a few people and set some stuff on fire."

Everyone looked at him as if he'd grown a second head. Well, not everyone. Mexico and Canada knew enough about New York so as not to be surprised. And the Netherlands seemed more contemplative than anything else, as though he was determining ways to justify homicidal tendencies in regards to a sporting event; he must have come up with something, as he nodded his head solemnly, as if silently agreeing that such a response was perfectly sensible.

"So," America said after a lengthy, awkward pause, "since you all don't seem averse to kids, I'll tell mine they can drop in now and again."

The rest of the room just stared blankly at his smiling face.

Chapter End Notes

Klootzak – a Dutch insult that translates as "ball sack," or scrotum, and is used in a similar fashion to "asshole" in English when applied to a person.

The Netherlands is one of America's oldest friends and allies, as a matter of historical fact. The Dutch were among the first to recognize us and the first US embassy was built
in The Hague. My mother thinks the reason why the Dutch were so eager to be our friends was because they never forgave Britain for taking away New Netherland (now New York and parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Delaware). Some of my ancestors were Dutch colonists in New Amsterdam (now New York City) and one of those ancestors even married a colonist from New Sweden.

The baseball rivalry between New York and Massachusetts is infamous, as most Americans know. I could easily see the personifications fighting over which team Daddy America will show support for (and the same can be found in any of the other states' sports rivalries); America, though, I would believe, just likes having baseball and tries his best not to favor one team or another. There's a similar situation for (American) football. Personally, I don't understand the appeal of watching organized sports, but to each his own.
America considered it a stroke of luck that New York hadn't recognized England at the meeting.

While none of America's children had ever met England, they all knew what he looked like. And the Original Thirteen all hated England with a passion. America even knew for a fact that a picture of England was a starring centerpiece for a dartboard in Massachusetts' bedroom and that Rhode Island was constantly asking Louisiana to make him an England voodoo doll (Louisiana even had a pretty good reason to be angry at England, herself). If New York hadn't been so distracted when he dropped in, he likely would have realized England was in the room with him and that would have probably ended with England being set on fire.

Of course, that wouldn't have been much worse than what occurred a few days after the New York incident.

America began to wonder if New York had decided to tell all his siblings it was now acceptable to barge in on world conferences rather than gently be introduced to the other nations at appropriate, prescheduled meetings. Unfortunately, it happened that the first two states to decide to follow New York's example and cause a disruption would be the ones that America most wanted to keep from meeting England until the last possible moment.

On the plus side, it was during a break so they hadn't interrupted another speaker.

Everyone was sitting around chatting in the conference room, having returned from getting coffee or coming back from the bathroom, when two teenage girls joined them. They hadn't charged in like New York, but their abrupt appearance did draw some attention.

One girl was tall and somewhat stern-faced. Her brown hair was pulled back and tied with a blue ribbon at the base of her neck, though a loose strand off the left side of her face refused to remain tucked. Her grey eyes observed the nations with a severe look of intense scrutiny. Across her nose was a light smattering of freckles. Her eyebrows were also a little thick; not quite England's level, but there was a noticeable similarity. She was wearing a very tasteful, modest dress of dark blue that covered her down to her ankles and up to her neck, giving her a bit of a schoolteacher quality which was further accentuated by the large book she kept tucked under her arm (the title of which read: *Advanced Mathematics and their Application in Aeronautics Engineering*).

If the first girl looked like a no-nonsense schoolteacher, the second girl looked like a student. She was short, sweet-faced, and smiling. Her untidy black hair was cut short to her chin and had a bright red bow fastened on one side. Her eyes were a rich green, exactly like England's own. She was dressed in a short, pleated skirt in yellow, black, red, and white tartan pattern and a pristine, white blouse. Her socks were knee-high and she wore tidy black Mary Janes shoes. She was also wearing a cross necklace.

"Heya, Daddy," the vaguely Catholic schoolgirl-looking girl said to America in a chipper tone.

"Maryland?" said America. "Virginia? What are you two doing here?"

"Yorkie said it's okay to visit you at work now," Maryland said happily.

"New York really needs to learn not to add his own interpretation to the word 'okay.'"
"So, you're not happy to see us?" Her face fell a little. "But, Ginny and I brought you crab cakes and Brunswick stew."

America smiled and shook his head fondly before waving the girls over. Maryland skipped over, hugged him, and set a picnic basket down on the table in front of him.

"What are you girls even doing in town today?" America asked.

"Mary wanted to see Hairspray," Virginia said, her tone every bit as unamused as her expression. "And she felt it necessary to drag me along with her."

"Ahyep," said Maryland with a giggle. "You need some sisterly bonding time."

"We could easily have done sisterly bonding by visiting a museum or something edifying. For goodness' sake, if you wanted to go to the theater, Lucia di Lammermoor was playing in Richmond."

Maryland made a face.

"You can go to the opera any old time, sis, but this is Hairspray."

"You only care about that silly musical because it's set in Baltimore."

Maryland stuck her tongue out at Virginia.

"Girls," said America patiently, "as great as it is to see you, we do have a meeting to get on with."

"Oh, sorry, Daddy," said Maryland. "We'll see ya later, then."

Maryland paused to get a good look at the nations before she left and froze. Her eyes went wide in shock and she started to shake. Then, she began to scream. It was actually more of a high-pitched shriek of pure and absolute terror, which shook even the most hardened of the nations to the very core.

"It's the maniac!" Maryland cried, followed by more screaming.

Everyone turned to look at Russia, figuring he was the most likely source of her fear. Russia just shrugged in confusion. The nations then turned back to look at Maryland and realized she wasn't looking anywhere even remotely close to where Russia was seated. She was, instead, staring (and, now, pointing) at England as if he were the very devil incarnate.

"He's come back to finish what he started!" Maryland added. She ducked behind America. "Daddy, save me!"

Virginia's attention had also been drawn to England (she'd noticed him when she first entered, but had restrained her ire to try and prevent Maryland from realizing he was there). Her steely eyes hardened and narrowed into cold slits, and she pulled a shotgun out from behind her back, having somehow managed to keep it hidden.

Maryland was now sobbing hysterically.

"Don't let him set us on fire again!"

Everyone was now staring intently at England. England, himself, seemed to be in a state of shock at the respectively terror-stricken and murderous responses he'd received from the personifications of two of his former colonies. He'd had some small sliver of hope that maybe some of his Thirteen
might be like him and not hold onto the rather turbulent history he had with their father. Now, however, he was wracking his brain to recall what he could possibly have done to Maryland that made her so upset. She'd mentioned him setting her on fire, but he'd never have burned a little girl! And Virginia, the first successful English colony of the New World, the place where it all began, was glaring at him with undisguised loathing, and he hadn't the foggiest idea why.

"Alrighty, Mr. Limey," said Virginia coldly, her cultured tone slipping into a harsh southern drawl. "I'll give yah the choice of where I put mah first bullet. Eyes or mouth?"

"Virginia, put down that shotgun, young lady," America said, trying to be strict but sounding more nervous than anything.

Virginia didn't move.

"He deserves it for what he did."

"It's been two hundred years, Ginny."

"And Mary still has the PTSD."

Maryland was clinging to America's side, her face pressed to his jacket, crying her eyes out, and shaking like a leaf. That alone made America feel very tempted to let Virginia do whatever she wanted to England. Well, within reason. Maybe just a light kneecapping.

"Ahem, may I speak?" said England cautiously.

"Only iffin' it's to say yer prayers," said Virginia. "I'll give yah 'til the count ah ten."

"I honestly have no idea what this is about, but I'm sorry for whatever it was I did."

Virginia practically snarled.

"That t'ain't no apology," she said. "It don't count iffin' yah don't admit what yah did. Think real hard. I'll even give yah a hint. It involved a psycho Brit who shoulda left well enough alone after Daddy kicked his butt outta here, a couple ah cannons and torches, and a *white house*."

"I'll give you another hint, Iggy," said America, no longer looking even faintly inclined to stop his enraged child. "If you remember anything about the geography of my land, you'll know which city lies right between Maryland and Virginia."

The gears in England's head began to turn and he finally put all the pieces together. August 24th, 1814. He'd gleefully given orders to his men to burn Washington, D.C. to the ground, with a special focus on the White House and the Capitol building. He remembered laughing as he saw it all go up in flames; well, until that freak hurricane hit and all his work proved to have done nothing except make the American people very, very angry.

Now, though, it struck him that his actions that night had caused far more harm than he'd ever intended. Certainly, he'd known that burning America's capital would likely cause him a lot of pain (England, himself, knew the feeling of one's capital burning to ash), but he hadn't realized that his actions might have affected innocent children in such a horrible manner. He'd only intended to retaliate against America's attack on Canada and – if England was completely honest – to make America hurt as revenge for leaving. If he'd known that his actions would have harmed children…

but, then, hadn't he already harmed more than a few *human* children with his actions, both in the War of 1812 and earlier during the Revolution? Would he have really done anything differently if he'd known about the states? He wanted to believe he would have, but his track record wasn't
exactly in his favor.

England looked away from the seething Virginia to the cowering form of Maryland. The girl had stopped crying, but was now watching England, as though preparing to flee if he made a move to attack her. Those eyes of hers, though. Exactly the same shape and color as England's, but distorted by fear. Fear of him. Her founding nation. He looked back at Virginia. Her eyes held no fear. Only hatred. And a certain degree of bloodlust.

England just hung his head, waiting for Virginia to enact her bloody vengeance.

"Virginia, put down the gun," America said, this time with a note of finality. He could see that England had realized what he'd done and truly seemed sorry for it. And, in all fairness, England wasn't entirely responsible for what happened that day. After all, Canada had been the one to actually start the fires (his northern brother may look innocent, but America often suspected that it was just a clever ruse to allay suspicion) and it had taken ages before America was willing to let his children anywhere near their uncle after that. Actually, Maryland and Virginia had reacted very similarly when they were introduced to their uncle, which was why America had wanted to put off their first meeting with England.

"But, Pa!"

"Now, young lady. It's making you talk like West."

"Don'tcha compare me to her. I ain't nothin' like that inbred hick."

"You just used a double-negative."

Virginia blanched and handed the shotgun to America.

"Oh, God, you're right," she said with a wince.

America just rested a hand on her shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile.

"It's okay, Princess," he said. "Just take a few deep breaths and think about the things you love."

Virginia closed her eyes.


She took one more deep breath and exhaled.

"You good, Princess?" said America.

"Yes. I'm good."

Now that there was no longer an immediate threat of shots being fired, America looked down at Maryland who was still clinging to his side.

"You okay, Little Oyster?" he said.

Maryland just buried her face into his jacket again.

"I promise you, England's not going to attack you." He looked up at England with a slight frown of doubt. "You aren't, are you?"
"Of course I'm not going to bloody attack her!" England yelled. He regretted doing that when he saw Maryland start to shake again. He sighed and lowered his voice as he spoke again. "I promise I have no intention of harming any of your children."

Virginia did not seem to believe him, but Maryland hesitantly raised her head to look England in the eye.

"Um, hello?" England said awkwardly.

"It's okay, Maryland," America assured her again.

Maryland cautiously pulled away from America's side and took a tentative step forward. She still looked like she wanted to bolt from the room. Virginia kept close to her, as if she was ready to jump in front of Maryland and take a bullet for her if she had to. While America wasn't happy that his daughters were so uncomfortable with the situation, it was a pleasant change of pace to see Virginia being so protective of her sister. Actually, it was odd that Maryland was being so timid; after all, even though England had hurt her badly during the War of 1812, she had still managed to kick his ass at Baltimore. Then again, she hadn't seen England's face during that battle, so she'd managed to hold herself together and fight without fear of flashbacks from her traumatic burning experience distracting her.

Maryland took another step closer. Then another. Soon, she was right in front of England, looking up at his face.

Two sets of identical green eyes met and there was a lengthy, silent pause as the two stared each other down. Finally, Maryland gave a small, shy smile…and promptly punched England in the stomach. England slumped to the floor, shaking and looking rather pale.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. England," Maryland said sweetly.

England let out a pained gurgle in response. The Republic of Ireland and Australia fell out of their seats from laughing. Many of the other nations winced, or tried to politely hold back their own laughs.

America sighed and shook his head. Now there was the Maryland he knew. The one who lived by the motto: Manly deeds, womanly words.

"Everyone," America announced, "this would be Mary-Anne Jones, the personification of Maryland." The other nations just looked at him blankly. "And this is Rebecca Jones, the personification of Virginia."

"Charmed," Virginia said dryly.

"While it is nice to meet you," said Germany, trying to regain some semblance of order in the meeting. "We must continue our conference."

"Very well," said Virginia. "We will carry on this pleasant little introduction another time."

"Bye, girls," said America. "I'll try to catch up with you after the meeting."

"We can go out to dinner," said Maryland. "Seafood, of course. It is Friday, after all."

"Maryland, for the millonth time, you're not Catholic anymore," said Virginia.

"I'm not? But, I feel so papal! Daddy, am I Catholic or Protestant?"
America just groaned as he felt a headache forming.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: England really can be a jerk. I mean, why would he see burning America's capital down as a point of pride? Wouldn't he know it would hurt America severely? England, himself, must have known the kind of pain that would inflict as he'd been through a similar situation (the Great London Fire). Even if he didn't know that D.C.'s bordering states were personified as two little girls, he shouldn't have been so smug about it. And the War of 1812 was really just entirely England's fault considering he was kidnapping American sailors and forcing them to serve on British ships as well as attacking neutral American merchant vessels (damn it, England, I know you're a former pirate, but did you really have to pull such a dick move?). I get that the burning of Washington was a retaliation for America's attempted invasion of Canada (and it was Canadian troops who did the actual burning of D.C., from what I hear), but America wouldn't have invaded Canada if England had just left America alone (well, maybe, I mean, Manifest Destiny was kind of going strong at the time and who knows what America would have done given time?).

Maryland is very confused religious-wise. She was founded as a refuge for Catholics. Then she got overrun with Protestants. Then back to Catholics, then back to Protestants. These days, most of her Christian population is Protestant, but there are still lots of Catholics. I even attended a Catholic high school in Maryland (I am a graduate of the Academy of the Holy Cross; Go, Tartans!). She's got PTSD from the burning of Washington because while Washington D.C. is technically between Maryland and Virginia (not specifically occupying one state or the other, but built on land taken from both states), it's on the Maryland side of the river and, therefore, closer to her than Virginia, meaning Maryland was more directly injured by the burning. Don't get me wrong, though; Maryland may seem like America's Italy equivalent, but she's also a pretty tough cookie when properly motivated.

Crab cakes are a way of life for Maryland. Actually, crab is a way of life for Maryland. As are oysters.

The Maryland state motto is "Fatti maschii, parole femine" which means "Manly deeds, womanly words." A lot of the politically correct crowd try to change the translation to "Strong deeds, gentle words," but I don't see the point. Also, Maryland's state sport is jousting and I plan on including that fact at some point (because, come on, guys, it's jousting).

Virginia has some pretty rigorous academic standards and I think the personification would try to embody that serious dedication to learning. The book she has is a reference to the brilliant aeronautics engineer Mary Jackson from Hampton, Virginia. Oh, and Virginia mentioning Lucia di Lammermoor is a reference to an actual production of said opera which took place in Richmond a few months ago which I attended (it was awesome, but the subtitles that the company put up were terrible). Virginia is also a little obsessed with making money because, as a colony, she was founded with money-making as her primary goal and she got rich off of tobacco; plus, until California came along and ruined everything for her, Virginia was America's "powerhouse," though she is still a fairly wealthy state.

Brunswick stew is a popular southern dish. Both Virginia and Georgia claim it was
theirs originally.

Oh, also, I don't know if Hairspray is playing in New York, at the moment, like in this chapter. I don't think it is, but, whatever, creative license and all that.
If there was one thing the other states knew it was not to get involved with the self-dubbed "Liberty Boys Trio."

The three ruling New England states who held the family's claim to freedom fame. Of course, Vermont frequently whined that he should be included, as he'd once been his own republic during the Revolution and still had memories of his previous existence (in which he'd served as a scout and drummer boy in the Continental Army) before he'd dissolved and re-manifested as one of America's states. But, naturally, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island weren't willing to share the glory, not even when New Hampshire threatened to beat them senseless for making Vermont cry and their cousin Quebec said he would help her (well, Quebec hadn't so much said he would as much as stand behind them menacingly and mutter obscenities in French). New York probably would have qualified, but he couldn't really stand being around Massachusetts more than was necessary and all the New England states kind of hated him on general principle as he wasn't really 'one of them,' so it was silently agreed by all parties involved that New York would not, in any way, shape, or form, be part of their club.

The Liberty Boys touted themselves as the primary leaders of the Revolutionary movement and the source of American independence. They were epicenters for American culture, education, and enterprise, being three of the most historically elite states of the nation. Of course, the other states just thought the three of them were completely full of it.

It wasn't easy having three gigantic egos breathing the same air, however, and there were more than a few incidents where arguments erupted at the Trio's meetings. Usually it involved someone commenting on Rhode Island's height, which would prompt Rhode Island to start screaming a colorful plethora of Italian swears and threatening to put a curse on the perpetrator (because, contrary to what you might think, Rhode Island was the one who possessed magic and not Massachusetts, though everyone was certain Connecticut had made a contract with the devil at some point).

There was one thing which the brothers could agree on, though. And that was an absolute, unyielding, and eternal hatred for England. They had never actually met the guy, but the memories their lands held at the times of their respective births had left them (as well as the other Thirteen) deeply tormented and caused them to lay the blame for the nightmares they had as children squarely at the feet of their father's former guardian, despite America's attempts to get them to realize that not every bad thing that happened was England's fault. Plus, Connecticut blamed England for saddling him with those monster eyebrows that refused to be plucked. So, yes, they were prepared to act like petty, vindictive little shits in order to relieve over two-hundred years' worth of pent-up anger.

That was why, when New York sent out the word that they didn't have to stay hidden from the rest of the world, the Liberty Boys decided it was open-season on their founding nation. It was also why they willfully pled ignorance to the message America left them warning them not to do what he was certain they were going to do.
It was ill-conceived, convoluted, racially-insensitive, and in incredibly poor taste.

So, naturally, they had to do it.

While conflicted over the fact that his outfit could be construed as cultural appropriation, Massachusetts quickly stifled the political correctness argument being fought in his head, mentally screaming at that part of his brain to 'shut the hell up,' and simply continued applying his face paint while Rhode Island carried in a large crate. Connecticut's toothy smile was positively evil as he took in the sight of their cargo and he rubbed his hands together, muttering "Excellent."

"So, Tommy," said Massachusetts. "When ah we gonna strike?"

"Soon, dear brother," Connecticut said, the light glinting off his teeth. "When he least suspects it, we shall enact our most exquisite revenge on that arrogant dunderpate."

"Va~ I still think it would have been easier to just summon the Old Ones," said Rhode Island. "You know, have them consume his enti-uh country."

When Massachusetts inquired about whether or not Rhode Island's made-up Old One friends had ever answered a summoning before, Rhode Island responded by calling Massachusetts a "stupid, stuck-up coglione who doesn't know the first thing about magic." Massachusetts just quirked a brow at him in amusement and then shoved his paint-covered hand into his little brother's face, leaving behind a handprint in bright red warpaint.

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It was the last day of the New York conference and the nations were quite eager to get home.

England, in particular, was hoping to leave before another unfortunate encounter with any more of America's states and their grudges. He was not interested in getting punched in the stomach by a little girl again (as in ever again). It was all just so awkward and unpleasant and he was very much hoping to drown out the memories of this conference with copious quantities of alcohol. Of course, he was not exactly looking forward to going home, either. Ireland, petty and spiteful woman that she was, had messaged Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales about what happened and those three idiots would likely burst out laughing as soon as he walked in the door.

"…And that is why we need to reform our current United Nations model in order to better achieve our Sustainable Development Goals," said Portugal. "You know, so we can actually get things done at these meetings instead of just screaming at and threatening each other. Agradecidos."

Portugal returned to his seat and the room fell into its usual mutterings.

"Right, I believe that concludes new business for today," said Germany. "Unless anyone has anything else to add, I believe we can conclude this session."

The nations were already reaching for their briefcases and collecting their papers.

"I'd say we have a bit of unfinished business," said an unfamiliar voice from above.

Well, it was unfamiliar to most of the other nations. America sighed and muttered about his "darn kids." Canada, quietly standing at the back of the room, smiled and turned on his phone's video camera, knowing full-well what was coming; those particular nephews of his were notoriously predictable.

Everyone looked up and saw three teenage boys in Native American getups standing in a heretofore unnoticed mezzanine. The tallest of the three boys hefted a large, wooden crate over his feather-
bedecked head and chucked it over the side, directly at England, while the other two whooped and hollered. England barely dodged a blow to the head from the crate, which burst open and splattered everyone nearby in soggy tea dregs. Had England's heart not been beating frantically from the attack, he would have mourned the loss of so much beautiful tea.

"Aw, what?" the tallest boy said. "He was supposed to get hit. No faiah dodgin' like that!"

"What the bloody hell?!" England screamed.

"Blast," said another boy, the first one who had spoken. "I thought for sure we'd get him. Oh well, Plan B. Tar and feathers, it is."

England realized rather quickly that he should probably run. However, the boys were not going to let their quarry escape so easily. They vaulted over the railing, shouting nonsensical war cries, and landed in a rather epic pose before they proceeded to tackle England to the ground with one of them taking charge of restraining him while the other two stood up to get out a can of tar and a bag of feathers.

"Dudes!" America said desperately. "This is not cool!"

England had managed to wrestle himself around in his captor's hold and his eyes widened as he came face-to-face with a teenage boy who looked almost exactly like America had when he was younger. Save only for the eyes, which were more of a blue-green color.

"Right, Dad," said the America-lookalike. "It's not 'cool.' It's wicked."

America yanked his son off of England, who scrambled to his feet and backed away from the crazed American children. America then shot a glare at the other boys, who reluctantly handed over the tar and feathers.

"Dudes, I thought I told you all 'no reliving the Boston Tea Party, no matter how fun it was.'" He turned his attention back to the boy who looked like him. "Massachusetts, I know you consider it a point of pride, but the Revolution ended over two centuries ago."

"But we didn't actually get to participate."

"Va~ he's righ', Da'," said the third boy. "We hadn' been bohn when you did all tha'."

"That doesn't mean you can go around attacking England whenever you want, Rhode Island," said America.

Rhode Island was very short, physically maybe as short as Latvia, and he also looked a lot like the Italy brothers. His hair was a dark, reddish brown with a distinctive loose curl and his scowl was very reminiscent of Romano's usual expression. His eyes, though, were a vivid teal green and his complexion was considerably lighter than that of the Italies.

"This cow-handed lubberwort has had it long in coming, Father," said the remaining boy.

"Connecticut, I know you're still angry."

"'Angry,' Father? Not at all. This is just a bit of innocent payback to remind the world that we Americans are still at the top of our game...and have long memories."

It was Connecticut's appearance that most surprised England. The boy looked a lot like England, himself, in the shape of his face and those large British eyebrows. His eyes were blue, though, like
America's and he wore glasses. Connecticut's hair was also slicked back in a style like the one England had used when he had disguised himself as an Italian back during WWII, although Connecticut's hair curl, like Rhode Island's, was real. His hair was also a heavy black color that didn't seem exactly natural, almost as though he'd greased it with some product or other to change the shade.

"Thomas J. Jones," America said warningly. "I know you are the ringleader of this little escapade. Your brothers may have wanted to do this, but they only would have if you were the one egging them on."

"Hey!" Rhode Island and Massachusetts shouted.

"Oh, you know it's true."

"Heh, faiah point," said Massachusetts. "And it was Tommy's idear."

"Now, no more threatening behavior, my dudes. Unless you all want another visit from Officer Shaughnessy."

The three boys shuddered. Officer Shaughnessy was a fifth generation Irish-American cop, the latest in a family of policemen who had the singular duty of putting any wayward Jones kids back on the straight-and-narrow. Though the usual troublemaker in the family was Illinois, who had been dragged back home at odd hours of the morning far more often than any of his siblings, the Shaughnessys had more than a few experiences with the hijinks of the Liberty Boys. And every one of those officers, no matter the generation, refused to tolerate any bullshit.

"This scene was getting old, anyway," said Massachusetts.

"Righ'," said Rhode Island. "Va~ I'm hungry. Let's get somethin' to eat."

"I don't know why but I'm really in the mood for chorizo."

"Va~ I think Elsie said she was making some papo seco."

"Aw, but New Jehsey is such a-er-"

"Johnny," America cautioned.

"What I mean to say is, er, my big sistah is a wondahful angel and…ugh, threw up in my mouth a bit."

Portugal and the two Italies were staring at the states. Spain looked like he desperately wanted to glomp Rhode Island. England, however, was silently wondering what he'd done to make the universe hate him so much. The other countries just tried not to draw attention to themselves.

"No more dodging the issue, dudes," America said. "Connecticut, as the eldest, you should know better by now."

"But, Father, I did not get my chance to thrash this lack-witted nincompoop during 1812. Those damned Federalists who were in charge of running my business wouldn't let me. Turncoats, the whole lot of them."

"Didn't stop you from workin' with'em to make a quick buck off the rest of us, Thomas," Rhode Island said somewhat bitterly.
"Oh, what would you know about it, Benjamin?" was Connecticut's snide response. "As I seem to recall, you made yourself rather scarce at the time. Not that there's much of you to be missed."

Rhode Island's eyes narrowed sharply. Massachusetts took a step back.

"The fuck you just say?" Rhode Island growled.

Connecticut smirked at him.

"You have to admit, little brother," he said. "That your stature is not as high as that of the rest of us. Not that I think little of you or would ever look down on your accomplishments, but your presence is often noted with minimal interest."

There appeared to be steam pouring out of Rhode Island's ears as his face turned a brilliant shade of red. A vein was throbbing in his forehead and his hands were balled into tight fists. Those familiar with Romano's temper recognized the warning signs of a violent eruption and began to look for cover.

"VA~ ARE YOU CALLING ME 'SHORT,' YOU FUCKING BITCH?!

"If the very small shoe fits," Connecticut said.

"THAT'S IT!"

While everyone braced for the expected pummeling that was sure to be unleashed by the furious boy, the attack did not come the way they anticipated. Rather than resort to his fists, Rhode Island, instead, whipped out a large, evil-looking book from somewhere and skimmed through the pages.

"Va~ I am gonna show you why you don' mess with a mastuh of the Dark Arts," Rhode Island snapped. "Aha! Here it is! Y'ai-n'shoggoth, iah, iah, uah-bog-shoroth, n'gai, Yog-Sothoth!"

Rhode Island pointed his hand at Connecticut as he said the last word of his incantation and a few sparks fizzled out of his fingertips. After a few silent moments, nothing happened. Connecticut started laughing.

"Better luck next time, old chum," he said.

Rhode Island simply smirked.

There was a sound like muted thunder and, out of thin air, a small, dark storm cloud appeared over Connecticut's head. Connecticut glanced upwards at it in curiosity, before it doused him with a torrential downpour unexpected for a cloud that size. The cloud then faded and Connecticut got to his feet, sputtering from the deluge, and ran a hand through his hair. However, his hair was not quite as it was before. His slicked 'do had been ruined and now messy strands stuck out in an untidy mop (though the Italian curl remained in place) as the inky, black substance he'd used to color it dripped off to reveal a yellow-blonde shade just like England's.

"Ah! My secret shame!" Connecticut screeched. "Don't look at me!"

He pelted from the room as fast as he could while Rhode Island just stood there, smiling triumphantly.

"So, ah, can we go now, Fathah?" said Massachusetts awkwardly.

"Fine, but don't think this conversation is over," America replied. "We are going to have a long talk
about why assaulting allied nations is bad when we get home." He then turned to Rhode Island. "And, Rhodey, how many times have I said 'no hexing your siblings'?

"It wasn' a hex, Da'," said Rhode Island. "Va~ It was' jus' a minuh jinx."

"I heard Elder language. And I'm fairly certain you called on an Old One."

"Well, would'ya look at the time," Rhode Island said looking at his wrist. He wasn't even wearing a watch. "Va~ I gotta feed Sparkles. You know how unicohns get if they don' have their dinnuh."

"And I gotter…" Massachusetts started, trailing off as he tried to think of a valid excuse. "Get… decorations for Boston Hahbohfest! That's it. Hahbohfest. Only comes once a yeah, you know."

"Wait a minute, Johnny," America said with suspicion. "It's nowhere near time for Harborfest."

"Well, nice to see ya, gotta go, bye!"

With that, the two boys dashed from the room. America closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and counted backwards from ten. In the silent interim, Connecticut skulked back into the room, now with a towel wrapped around his head to hide his hair.

"Those stooges left without me?" he said. "Ooh, they'll get theirs. Mark my words."

"Connecticut, take off that towel," America said. "No one cares what your hair looks like."

"Never! I will not allow anyone to see me in such disgrace."

"Thomas, for the last time, you are not cursed, God does not hate you, and there is nothing wrong with the way you look."

England now had a somewhat disbelieving expression on his face. He was not certain whether he should feel flattered that America had indirectly paid him a compliment considering how much Connecticut resembled him, or if he should be annoyed by the fact that Connecticut even thought there was something wrong with looking like England, in the first place.

"Say what you will, Father," Connecticut said with a huff. "But nothing shall shake my resolve nor compel me to look any more like him than I have to." He pointed sharply at England.

England decided that, yes, he was going to be annoyed. Annoyed, indignant, and utterly outraged.

"You didn't care about how you looked when you were a kid," America continued.

Connecticut narrowed his eyes at his father suspiciously.

"That has nothing to do with anything."

"I think it does." America gave an innocent smile. "I think I even still have a picture."

"You cannot possibly have it! I thought I got rid of all those damnable daguerreotypes!"

"I have my ways."

"Don't you dare!"

"You brought this on yourself, kiddo."
America pulled out his wallet and began fishing around. Connecticut, in a fit of desperation, tried to lunge at his father and snatch the wallet away, only for America to dodge as he continued his search. After a few seconds, America's smile widened and he pulled out a modern scan copy of an old black-and-white picture which he cheerfully decided to show England first.

The picture was of a little boy with messy, fair-toned hair and large eyebrows (the Italian curl must have come along later). The boy looked exactly like England as a child. What made the picture even more adorable to those who saw it (as a crowd had formed behind England to get a look) was the little, old-timey child's suit the boy was wearing, complete with a large bow on the front. The boy was looking a bit pouty in the picture, clearly unhappy about having to sit still for so long.

"Ohonhonhon," France chuckled behind England. "Angleterre, if I didn't know better I would think that boy was your son."

Connecticut's scowl deepened.

"No one asked your opinion, damned Frenchie!" he shouted furiously.

Everyone stared at Connecticut and Connecticut stared back. He then whipped out a cellphone, frantically dialed a number, and screamed at someone on the other end to get him out of there. Several seconds later, a rumbling outside the building caused everyone to glance at the window to see a helicopter outside. Connecticut bolted for the window and leapt out, grabbing onto a rope ladder that was dangling from the helicopter's side and clambered up into the aircraft, hightailing it away from the meeting.

"I don't think we're going to have any more interruptions for a while," America said pleasantly, quickly exchanging a look with Canada.

Canada quietly smirked and forwarded copies of the video.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I'm picking on England way too much, but he's just so easy to rile up. Don't worry, England, not all America's states hate you.

Anyway, yeah, Boston Tea Party. A group of men, calling themselves the "Sons of Liberty," dressed up like Native Americans and chucked tea into Boston Harbor to protest the Tea Act. The particular disguises, while necessary for protecting the participants' identities, were also symbolic as, by dressing as Native Americans, they were showing that their allegiance and identity were, first and foremost, with America and not with Britain.

In case you didn't notice, I did not reveal what Connecticut's, Massachusetts', and Rhode Island's middle names are even though I hinted that they have them (at least I noted that Connecticut does; Thomas J. Jones, and his brothers are John I. Jones and Benjamin C. Jones). That's because their middle names are a little embarrassing and I plan on having another chapter where they are revealed (Rhode Island's isn't so bad, but the other two are really cringe-worthy).

Portugal's comment is based on an actual goal of U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. The foods that Massachusetts and Rhode Island mention are also Portuguese.
and are popular in America. Massachusetts and Rhode Island are two of the top states with people of Portuguese ancestry (California is first, though); New Jersey also has a big Portuguese community. Okay, I just included all that because I wanted to mention Portugal, because Portugal is awesome (I had an ancestor who went over to fight alongside the Portuguese in one of their conflicts with Spain; I think it was the attempted Castilian invasion in the Seven Years' War, but I'm not certain).

Agradecidos – a formal, plural "thank you" in Portuguese.

I like to think of Connecticut being a bit like Mr. Burns from "The Simpsons." Therefore, he uses a lot of antiquated slang words, especially old-fashioned insults, and acts a bit devious and underhanded.

The "Va" thing that Rhode Island does, apparently, some kind of Rhode Islander verbal tic that they add onto the beginnings of words that don't need it, usually things starting with "I."

The Federalists were an early political party in America which touted stronger central government. In Connecticut, a number of businessmen who had vested financial interest in trade with Britain were part of the Federalist party and, despite profiteering off the war through weapons manufacturing, tried to negotiate a backroom deal with Britain during 1812 and even considered secession. When the war ended, the Federalists were disgraced and regarded as traitors, causing the party to crumble.

Coglione – Italian for "testicle."

Rhode Island was the birthplace and home of science fiction/horror writer H. P. Lovecraft, the creator of the Cthulhu mythos. I think Rhode Island is more likely to be a magic-user than Massachusetts. Rhode Island's little spell is nonsense words based on the incantations from The Necronomicon in Lovecraft's works. America also gave Rhode Island the unicorn that England gave to him, because Rhody can actually see it (well, the other members of the North American Magic Club can, too, but America knows Rhode Island often feels underappreciated, so he let him have the unicorn).

My mention of "Officer Shaughnessy" is a reference to stories from my dad's childhood about Irish cops who, when they caught you misbehaving, would beat the ever-loving hell out of you, frog-march you home so all the neighbors could see you, frequently give you a thwack from the baton as you walked, and then hand you over to your parents so your father could wail on and yell at you. This happened to my dad exactly once, and he made sure it never happened again. For my story headcanon, there is a specific family of Irish-American policemen who are responsible for reprimanding the states when they misbehave, and all the states, the boys mostly, are terrified of crossing the latest "Officer Shaughnessy."

England's former colonies are a lot more like him than he thought. Connecticut is seriously embarrassed that he looks so much like England (and the fact that he's the only "New England" state who does). He claims it's some kind of divine punishment, considering he was the state where Benedict Arnold was born, so he does everything he can to distance himself from his English roots.

Boston Harborfest is an annual celebration of Boston history. Takes place in late June through early July.

A daguerreotype was an early form of photograph from the 19th century.
Connecticut was where the first successful, mass-produced helicopter was created by Igor Sikorsky.
"It's not funny!" Connecticut said sharply.

New York was currently rolling on the floor, laughing his head off. It would seem an unusual sight for those nations who had witnessed only the homicidal and neurotic sides of New York. In reality, he could be somewhat laidback and friendly...when he was upstate, of course. New York also had quite a good sense of humor, even with his near-constant agitation with everything and everyone.

And the fact that Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island had all so thoroughly embarrassed themselves was the highlight of New York's day.

They were all currently chilling at New Jersey's place. She wasn't exactly thrilled that her little brothers had decided to drop in unexpectedly, but she'd seen the video Uncle Canada had shared and so figured it was a perfect opportunity to get in some light-hearted mocking. Like New York, she'd done the rolling around on the floor and laughing her ass off thing when she saw it, but had managed to calm down long enough to let them all in. Until Connecticut looked her in the eye and then she was off again.

The Liberty Boys Trio had been with her for a couple hours before New York showed up, saw them, and arrived at the current situation of laughing at their faces.

"You shouldn't laugh at them," said a low, female voice.

New York looked over at Delaware, who was watching him with her usual impassivity, and snorted.

"They were askin' for it, Del," he said. "Even I wouldn't have tried somethin' like that in the U.N. headquarters, of all places."

"You would have attacked England, too, if you weren't so distracted by every shiny object that passes in front of you," Connecticut snapped.

"A'ight, I admit it, I hate the limey jerk as much as any of us. But I'd have done it without gettin' caught."

Connecticut scoffed at him.

"Don't believe me, Tommy-boy? Kindly remind me which of the two of us had a spy ring that won the Revolution."

"The Revolution was won by valiant Patriots who died on the battlefield!" Connecticut said defensively. "And your people were all being a bunch of Tory-loving sellouts."

"Va~ I'd suppose you'd know all about 'selling out,' wouldn' you, Mistuh Federalist?" said Rhode Island.

"SHORT!"

Massachusetts had to restrain Rhode Island to keep him from finishing the fight from earlier.

"You's all being ridiculous," Delaware said in a low, serious tone. "Stop the fighting."
"He started it!" the boys all shouted, each one pointing at another.

"Don't care who started it. It stops, now."

The boys all seemed prepared to launch arguments about why their fight was important and their respective views as to who was in the right, but were silenced when Delaware began to give them 'the look.' Ever since they were little, Delaware had been gifted with the strange ability to cow people with just a particularly stern look. She was very quiet most of the time, but 'the look' spoke volumes about what she could do if she was sincerely angered. Back in 1968, she frequently quelled rioters just by giving them 'the look' and politely requesting that everyone calm down and go home, speaking in her dry, serious tone as always.

"Yo, Del!" New Jersey called from the kitchen. "Ya totally gotta teach me how you can make 'em shut up like that. If only it was permanent!"

"Bitch!" New York shouted back.

"And proud of it, too, Trash-Bastard!"

"I'm going to lie down for a while," Connecticut mumbled, rubbing his forehead in frustration. "Elsie, do you have any of those experimental painkillers?!" he called out.

"In the medicine cabinet!" New Jersey answered. "Top shelf! Possible side-effects are nausea, eyeswelling, and a weird smell emanating from the elbows!"

"Thank you!"

Connecticut marched up the stairs, grumbling about 'getting even one day.' Rhode Island decided he was going to go help New Jersey with the cooking, Massachusetts started texting Pennsylvania about the whole 'Tea Party' incident, New York got into a belligerent phone call with an undoubtedly terrified stockbroker, and Delaware began poking through the comic books New Jersey had on the shelf…most of which seemed to be Japanese manga.

Later, when everyone was sitting around the table for dinner, the fighting broke out again and Delaware, once more, had to silence everyone with 'the look.' New York and Massachusetts still tried to kick each other under the table, though.

The next morning, everyone was shocked to find New York was actually still asleep at seven o'clock. Normally, New York didn't sleep more than maybe two or three hours…per week. It turned out that he'd gotten into New Jersey's medicine cabinet looking for another bottle of the painkillers Connecticut had used the previous night and had mistakenly grabbed a bottle of high-strength sleeping pills.

"Well, at least it will keep him from driving," Connecticut said with a wry smirk.

"You know damn well he had his license pehmanently revoked," said Massachusetts. "Not even his own people trust him behind the wheel."

"Va~ He's gonnuh act like a bigguh bitch than usual when he wakes up," said Rhode Island.

"Ey, per'aps it's fer the best," said New Jersey. "I dunno, he seems happy and junk. Let the poor bastard have a day off fer once."

There was a strangely fond smile playing about her lips. For all that New Jersey and New York liked
to rag on each other, the fact was that they were both steadfastly loyal to each other. Pennsylvania once even called them the "Trash Twins," because they were so close they even dumped all their shit on each other. New York and New Jersey thanked Pennsylvania for the affectionate nickname by stuffing dead rats in all the shoes in her closet.

"Whatever," said Connecticut. "I have to get to work. Monopolistic takeovers don't organize themselves, you know. Rhode Island, why don't you go and…polish seashells or dig for crabs or whatever the hell it is you do during the day."

Massachusetts managed to steer Rhode Island out of the room before he could start screaming about being the home of multiple Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies and about his long, noble history of participation in numerous industries. Once the boys had left, Delaware looked at New Jersey, who smiled back.

"I'm gonna stay with him," she said. "He'll need someone he can vent to when he does wake up."

"Hmm," was all Delaware said in response before standing and heading downstairs.

New Jersey grabbed a comic book out of her jacket, popped a stick of gum in her mouth, and began to read as she awaited the inevitable firestorm of New York finding out he'd slept through an entire day. Just as a precaution, and for the sake of posterity, she had a video camera going to capture the moment.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Delaware was just grabbing her purse when she heard a cellphone buzzing. She looked over at the couch, where the little device was resting, and realized it was Connecticut's phone. She figured she had better take it and give it back to him, because New Jersey would undoubtedly try to tamper with it if Delaware left it with her (New Jersey had a habit of trolling her siblings, and woe to any state foolish enough to leave their cellphone in New Jersey's clutches). However, she couldn't help but notice that a message had been left by their father.

Figuring that it might be important, as America tended not to call the states so early in the morning, knowing they would likely be on their respective ways to work, she decided to play the message.

"Hey, T-J, kiddo, I was wondering if you could do a solid for your old man. I need someone to give a couple of nations a ride to the airport. They had a problem or something with getting a taxi. Anyway, I'll text you the address. Let me know if you can make it."

Delaware quickly sent a message on the phone to let her father know that someone was on the way. She wasn't in any great rush, so she could easily fill in for Connecticut in escorting some nice folks to the airport. Thank goodness she decided to bring the Ford Explorer, otherwise there might not be enough room for everyone.

America had found out about the Nordic Five's transport problems quite by accident. It turned out that the hotel where they were staying was on the route America took during morning walks whenever he stayed in New York City. Apparently, Denmark had been blacklisted by the New York cab companies for numerous incidents, most of which involved the axe he persistently smuggled into the country, and so they were stranded. In fact, the only reason they'd been able to get to their hotel for this visit, in the first place, had been thanks to the subway system (which Denmark was now, also, banned from).

America would have offered them all a lift, himself, being a total hero and all, but he simply didn't keep a car in New York City. No one who lived in New York City owned a car. Which was probably why New York, himself, tended to panic behind the wheel and, as a result, was no longer...
allowed to drive.

That's why he called up some outside help. Connecticut had, thankfully, not picked up on his brother's driving skills (or lack, thereof), despite having to visit him frequently for work matters, and was the closest feasible option for help in escorting the Nordics to airport.

Currently, America was waiting with the Nordics in the hotel lobby. Finland was cheerfully asking America questions about the states, as he'd been dying to know all about how America had managed to raise fifty children all on his own.

"Well, it's actually more than fifty," America said. "I've still got some territories, you know."

"That's right!" Denmark chimed in. "I sold you my West Indies ages ago. What was it you renamed her?"

"Her name is 'Virgin Islands.'"

Denmark began snickering. Norway promptly grabbed his tie sharply, causing him to choke a bit.

"It's rude to laugh at someone's name," Norway said sternly.

America tried to stifle a laugh at the little scene, which made the Nordics look at him curiously.

"Oh, sorry, dudes," America said. "It's just, you two reminded me of two of my other kids for a moment."

Before they could ask him to elaborate, America's cellphone gave a light 'ding' and looked at it.

"Ah, ride's here, dudes."

The Nordics quickly got their suitcases and followed America outside, but were surprised when he suddenly froze and began to look nervous.

Waiting there, in front of the hotel, was a Ford Explorer in a sandy yellow color (a shade known as "buff," if one wants to be specific). The license plate was pitch black with a single number on it in white; the number "1."

A teenage girl, maybe seventeen years old, dressed in a crisp, blue business suit, got out of the driver's seat. The Nordics all stared in surprise, though Norway hid it better than the others, as they took in her appearance. She was a somewhat short girl, with sharp features but a slightly round face. Her long, light blonde hair was a little bit untidy at the top. Her dark blue eyes peered at them from behind a pair of rectangular glasses. She kept her expression perfectly neutral, almost eerily so.

Norway, Denmark, and Iceland looked at Sweden and Finland, then back to the girl.

"Hey, Del," America said cheerfully, though his smile was a little strained. Internally, he was screaming at the thought of getting into a car with his eldest child behind the wheel. "I thought Connecticut was coming."

"Left his phone behind," she replied in a low tone. "I saw the message." She gave a shrug. "I'm here."

"Great. Uh, thanks, Little Diamond."

"Hmm."
America turned to the Nordics, who were still looking as though they couldn't quite process what
they were seeing.

"Oh, dudes, this is my eldest, Delaware," he explained. "Christina Jones."

Delaware nodded silently and stared at the five nations.

"Time to go?" she said.

The Nordics shook themselves out of the awkward silence and loaded their luggage into the back of
the vehicle before getting in and buckling up. America politely asked (and internally pleaded) his
daughter if she would prefer it if he drove. Delaware silenced any further inquiries by leveling him
with 'the look.' The Nordics noticed the exchange, but were too astonished by the similarity of the
expression with the 'scary face' that Sweden was known to possess that they didn't think anything
about America's attempt to take charge of the driving.

Approximately two minutes in to getting on the road, it became clear that Delaware was not pleased
with the New York City traffic. Her brow was furrowed in stern concentration (again, much like
Sweden), but there was a glint in her eyes and a faint twitch at the corner of her mouth that was
reminiscent of Finland whenever he had a sniper rifle in his hands. The Nordics were only able to
see her expression because the rearview mirror was tilted at an angle that allowed them to see it; and
they all realized what was coming next when Delaware said:

"Did he just cut me off?"

America stifled a whimper. Heroes do not whimper. Even when their teenage daughters begin to rev
the accelerator on a screaming, metal deathtrap of a car. Even when their teenage daughters narrow
their eyes in rage. Even when their teenage daughters decide that traffic is for wussies and that the
best way to resolve it is to start driving over the tops of the cars in front of them.

No. Heroes do not whimper in such instances.

They do, however, scream in terror and cling to their seats so tightly that the leather will have
permanent indentations.

The car bounced, rumbled, and even seemed to soar through the air at various intervals. The local
police looked about to intervene, but one glance at the license plate and they knew exactly who they
would have to deal with, so they simply chose to go back to their normal duties. At one point, the car
seemed to catch on something and, after some more revving from Delaware, ended up somersaulting
through the air, flipping as it hit the ground, and landing on its bumper, where it teetered back and
forth for a few seconds before settling on its tires. Delaware then slammed her foot on the accelerator
again, so hard that flames were practically erupting from underneath the car, and gunned it straight to
JFK International Airport.

The Nordics toppled out of the car as soon as Delaware got out and slid the door open for them.
America was too numb to move and remained fastened to his seat; he may have known what his
daughter's driving was like, but that didn't make it any easier to live with.

Denmark was shaking and hugging his prized axe as if it were a security blanket, because he just
needed to hold onto something after that ordeal. Norway, while still maintaining his perfectly blank
expression, seemed more than a little invested in standing as far away from Delaware as he could,
while helping Iceland to not have a panic-attack. Even Sweden appeared to be a little ruffled by the
experience. The only one who hadn't been utterly traumatized was Finland, who was smiling
pleasantly and thanking Delaware for getting them all there 'safe and sound.'
"It was nice meeting you," Finland said.

"Yeah, same," said Delaware. There was the tiniest hint of a smile on her lips.

Delaware helped Sweden unload the rest of the suitcases while Finland assisted Norway with Iceland, who was beginning to hyperventilate. The two of them said nothing but occasionally glanced at each other.

Sweden was certain he recognized Delaware from someplace. Even without the physical similarities to himself and Finland, he could have sworn he had met her before. Long ago, in a time half-forgotten.

"Sve, come on," Finland called out. "We don't want to miss the flight!"

Sweden nodded and gave Delaware another glance.

"H've g'od day," he said.

"Hej så länge, Farfar," Delaware said softly.

Sweden froze and stared at her far more intently than before. Delaware didn't seem to notice and simply shut the trunk of her car and headed back over to the driver's seat. She took off at a breakneck speed, leaving Sweden standing there with a deeply contemplative expression.

"Sve?" Finland said as he came over to him. "What is it?"

Pieces slowly fell into place in Sweden's head. Sweden and Finland had been the ones to find America as a child, back when they were trying to establish a colony. Indeed, Sweden had always had this lingering thought that America, and even his brother Canada, looked like they could have been Nordics; they bore far much more in common with the Nordics, at least in a physical sense, than they did with England and France. Sweden had thought it strange, considering the native peoples did not look anything like Europeans, but some part of him wondered if America and Canada had some other connection.

But that girl, Delaware, certainly caused things to click. Even her human name, Christina, was an old one which had been highly popular for Swedish girls for centuries. Sweden called up his mental map of America and tried to remember where Delaware was located. The answer caused his hands to shake and all he could think of was two simple words:

_Nya Sverige._

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Delaware's name, 'Christina,' is a reference to Fort Christina of the New Sweden Colony (which is now Wilmington, Delaware). Delaware's nickname, 'Little Diamond,' is an allusion to the nicknames for the state, 'the Diamond State' and 'the Small Wonder.'

Hej så länge – is a form of "goodbye for now" in Swedish.
Farfar – Swedish for "(paternal) grandfather."
Nya Sverige – New Sweden.
Delaware inherited Sweden's 'scary face' that makes people think he's going to murder them when he's really just thinking something totally benign. The reference to 1968 concerns the riots, specifically the Wilmington riots, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when the Delaware National Guard was called in to basically take control of the city for over a year.

Delaware is infamous as the home of some of the worst drivers in the country regarding careless driving (often resulting in death). I don't know this from personal experience, but a study was done on each state's driving record and Delaware seems to be in the top ten (tied with North Carolina, apparently). Delaware even outdoes New York (who has a bad rep with most of the country, especially his neighboring states). Connecticut seems to have a bad history of drunk driving, but I feel that, as long as he's sober, Connecticut is generally one of the better drivers in the family. The worst driver of all, according to the study, Montana (believe me, this is definitely going to come up again).

Delawareans apparently covet their black license plates and the lower the number you have on it, the richer you are. Delaware, herself, would undoubtedly have a license with the number "1" on it, if only because she's the first state.

New York's "spy ring" is the famous Culper Ring which ran intelligence operations out of British-occupied New York. The spymaster of the group was none-other than George Washington, himself. The series "Turn: Washington's Spies," which I've been watching on Netflix, gives a pretty good look at what was going on.

New Jersey is a leader in biotech and pharmaceutical companies, so I imagine her bringing home a lot of experimental drugs and testing them on her siblings. She does warn them about possible side-effects first, just in case they try to sue her (which they would totally try to do). New Jersey is also pretty heavily into Anime/Manga and has several notable conventions.

I liked how I did New York and New Jersey's relationship. I see it as one where they like to scream at and insult and pretend to hate each other, but, at the end of the day, they are actually best friends and would always stand by each other. I don't know why I see their relationship like this, but it just turned out this way.

I actually don't know much about cars, so I had to look this up. The Ford Explorer seems to have a small problem of being somewhat dangerous to drive and holds a very poor rating on its crash safety tests. So, I figured it was a perfect vehicle for a road-maniac like Delaware.

There's this common understanding in the U.S. that no one who actually lives in NYC owns a car because it's really, really expensive to do so and it's just easier to rely on walking or public transport. There probably are people who live in NYC who own cars, but the majority don't appear to.
I decided to create a little interim chapter because I felt I wasn’t really getting the nations’ reactions across fully. I also provided a bit of historically-based character development for some of the other nations.

When did this develop an actual plot? It was supposed to be a collection of one-shots, but now it has a semblance of a storyline.

England didn't even bother carrying his luggage upstairs. He just dropped it in the hallway, trudged into the sitting room, and face-planted right onto a sofa. In a few minutes, he would try to muster the strength to go over to the liquor cabinet and pour himself a drink – or five. Might as well make it a full thirteen. One for every former North American colony he now had plotting his demise.

How on God's green earth had this happened?

One day he'd been putting up with the usual childish nonsense he'd come to expect from America, not thinking there was anything more to the lad than what met the eye because the boy wore his heart on his sleeve. The next thing he knew, America had FIFTY children. And had been raising them for over two hundred years.

America…the nation who charged into action at the drop of a hat…who prattled on about superheroes and giant robots and space aliens…who was constantly stuffing his face with food and couldn't read the atmosphere to save his life…that America, had raised fifty children.

Not even England could claim to having raised that many. England had colonies, to be sure, but he'd been somewhat distant as a guardian for most of them. Australia and New Zealand had been practically feral for ages, India had been an adult for longer than England had, South Africa had always been strangely mature and hadn't needed much minding, Belize had been a teenager when he became one of England's colonies and simply followed any orders England sent him. Actually, America and…that other one…Canada, that was it…had actually been the only ones England personally had a hand in raising.

And he hadn't been there for them that much, either. He just dropped in every couple of years to see how they were doing.

Oh, God, and both of them had children. That was what America had said. Two boys, scarcely more than children, themselves, had had to be single parents without the faintest idea of what parenting was supposed to involve. And that was England's fault. He'd failed as a big brother.

But America had been so mature when handling his children. It was…strange. England had seldom seen America take anything seriously. Yet he knew just how to calm down his children or stop them from committing international incidents. His children trusted him and – more or less – listened to him. In all those encounters, America had acted like…like…

Well, like an adult.
England had seen a side of America which he had never witnessed before. And it made England wonder just how much he actually knew about his former 'little brother.'

England had tried to keep tabs on America after his Revolution. Even with the two of them at-odds and all the hurt feelings between them, England had still cared about him. 1812 had been a horrible, horrible mistake…of course it was France’s fault for following that wanker Napoleon into a scheme for European conquest. America had been trying to build trade relationships with both England and France, but England wasn't going to allow France even a slight opportunity for support and so granted permission to the British navy to seize American merchant vessels…and impress American sailors into their service.

When it had come to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, England noticed that America was absent from the meeting. It wasn't until later that he realized that, because communication was still slow at the time, British forces had attacked New Orleans after peace had been declared. England had gone to America's house to apologize for the mix-up and to try to rebuild friendly relations; however, America had refused to even open the door to him. In fact, someone had pointed a gun out of one of the upstairs windows and started taking potshots until England left.

England had thought it was America, at the time, but now he suspected that maybe one of the states had done it.

After that, trade had taken off between their people. But America still refused to speak to England. America didn't really speak to anyone at all. In fact, he'd entered a state of isolation from the world, only emerging when his interests were threatened. Which was rather ironic as, during that time, America had been the one to convince Japan to come out of isolation.

There had been a couple of brief instances where England had met America during this time. The whole "befriending the whales" thing, for example. But, even then, the two of them still had an awkward relationship.

Still, much of what America had done during the nineteenth century was a mystery to the other nations. They heard the official story, of course. The Mexican-American War, which may have had more to it than anyone suspected, and the whole westward push and the era of cowboys and outlaws. And…there was another part of America's history that only a handful of other nations knew anything about. The American Civil War.

America's southern states had rebelled and tried to secede.

He knew it was a very touchy subject with America. England once tried to joke about America 'rebelling against himself' and how history had come full circle, only to end up with a fist to the jaw and a look of such fury in America's eyes that England never dared bring it up again. England had wondered just how horrible that war must have been for America to react in such a way.

Now he realized why.

If America's states were personified and were, in fact, America's children, then that meant that America had had to watch his own children shooting at each other. And England knew how nightmarish it can be to have loved ones fighting and being unable to do anything about it.

"Well, Artie, I hear ye had an interestin' little trip to America," came a familiar, mocking voice.


"Patrick, Dylan, and I had a most enjoyable time when Erin sent us the news. Such a dear lass, she
Scotland took a seat on the armrest of the sofa. England could practically feel him smirking. He could certainly smell his dreadful cigarette smoke.

"Who woulda thought little Alfie-boy had it in him?" Scotland continued. "I mean, Matthew I could definitely see, but Alfred never struck me as the settlin' down sort. Free as the wind, that one."

"Do you have a bloody point, here, Allistor? Or is this just some excuse to start guilting me?"

"Mostly guiltin', I'd say."

"Then push-off. I'm not in the mood."

"I can't possibly imagine what it must like to have one's former colonies hate ye."

"You don't have any former colonies."

"…Nova Scotia."

"Never heard of it."

"Ye daft tit, it's one of Canada's provinces now."

"…Who?"

Scotland smacked England upside the head.

"Oh, right, Canada," England said. "Forgot about him."

"Ye usually do," Scotland muttered with a glare. "Anyway, it seems that, since America's wee bairns let slip that they and their cousins exist, they've taken ter writin' us."

"What?"

"Aye." Scotland poked around inside his jacket for a moment and withdrew a handful of letters. "I'm quite popular, it seems. It's probably the accent. Folks across the pond love it."

"The bloody hell are you talking about?!"

"Our wee nieces and nephews, o'course. They've decided ter write us letters. Ye've got a couple, yerself."

"What?"

"Are ye goin' deaf, too, Artie? Shame 'bout that. I left yer mail on the dinin' room table, if yer interested."

England quickly got to his feet and headed for the dining room, Scotland following at a sedate pace. Just as Scotland had said, there was a pile of letters sitting on the table. England didn't have very high hopes for anything written by the Thirteen, but a nation could dream, couldn't he?

"Oh, and there was one other thing," Scotland continued, clearly trying to suppress a smirk. "A package came from someone called 'Montana.' It was makin' some strange tickin' sounds that got on my nerves, so I moved it."
England glared at his older brother suspiciously.

"Where did you move it, exactly?"

At that precise moment, an explosion came from the kitchen. England let out a terrified shriek and Scotland grinned wickedly. Looks like it would be at least a week without England's attempts at cooking.

"Well, I called that right," Scotland said. "I get the feelin' that one takes after Patrick."

France was in a particularly good mood as he finished unpacking and settled himself on his balcony to enjoy a glass of wine and bask in the beauty of another magnificent Parisian evening.

He certainly had a lot to contemplate after the little revelation at the world conference in New York.

Like the possibility that his former French territories in North America may have become personified. He didn't know a great deal about America's states, but he was certain he remembered that Louisiana retained distinctly French qualities. He knew a lot about Canada's province of Quebec as a bastion of French culture in the North American continent (though he wished Canada would learn to speak French properly, without that dreadful accent). He would have attempted to do some further research, but everything was done online these days and, to be quite honest, computers terrified him.

However, France was feeling quite optimistic.

And it had been so amusing watching England get set-upon by his own former colonies. In particular, the ire directed towards England by New England states, especially that Connecticut boy, had been uproariously funny. France had been quite sincere in his statement that Connecticut could easily have passed for England's son, which made the entire scene like something out of a dramatic farce.

Still, France couldn't help but wonder how it was that America was able to keep his children a secret for so long. Granted, America hadn't realized it was supposed to be a secret, but that just meant it should have come out sooner. And as for Canada, France was confused about why the dear boy had also never mentioned his children before. What could they possibly have to hide?

And another was bothering France. What was it that Mexico had meant when she had answered France's teasing question about how many ladies America had gotten into bed with to have so many children? Mexico had said "Two," with one of those two being herself. But who was the second woman and why was there so much tension between America and Mexico over the situation? Spain had taken a firm stance of "America must have been leading poor Mexico on," but France was certain there was more going on than met the eye. The two of them had tried to ask Mexico about it, but she had snapped at them to stay out of her business and not to bother her own states. France had expected such treatment, as Mexico still wasn't too fond of him because of that unpleasant business back in the 1860s. Spain had been disappointed, though, as he and Mexico were actually getting on well these days and he had expected her to confide in him, especially about something so important.

France was nothing if not determined, however. And he knew that, if he waited for the opportune moment, all the fascinating details of the affair could be brought into the light.

Russia was currently hiding in a secure bunker hidden under an old warehouse in Vladivostok that had once been used for processing and storing fish. He was reasonably certain that his little sister Belarus hadn't realized he'd switched flights and gotten on a plane to China (though he was certain
China would tell, as the flight he'd gotten onto had been the same one China had taken to get home) and then traveled by train up to his own lands.

Still, the solitude allowed Russia the chance to contemplate the shocking revelation about his old rival America (his "frenemy," as the other nation would say).

While Russia often liked to make jokes about America, mostly about the other nation's intelligence, he couldn't deny that America was far stronger and craftier than he looked. If America had truly wanted to keep his children a secret, Russia had little doubt that no one would ever have known about them. Russia, therefore, concluded that America sincerely hadn't considered his children a secret, but that he had simply stumbled into one of Fate's little games. And Fate so enjoyed playing games with nations.

Purple eyes flicked up to the map that hung on the wall. A map of the North American region. Russia had made it his goal long ago to find out everything he could about the countries of North America, with the United States being a primary focus.

Indeed, Russia's interest in the United States went all the way back to the eighteenth century. Russia had even managed to establish colonial land claims from Alaska down into parts of California, though the California territory was unstable and too far away to control effectively. But Russia had even begun to build friendly ties to the United States, himself, right after his having attained independence. Even during America's Revolution, Russia's dear Tsarina Catherine had told him that America showed the potential of being a good friend to the Russian Empire, which was why Russia had politely refused to send England any help in ending the Revolution. For years after, Russia and America had been on very good terms; America even invited Russia over to his house on occasion, from what Russia could recall (though his memories from those years were a little foggy ever since Russia's own Revolution).

The purchase of Alaska was something from that time which Russia currently looked back on with a sense of regret. The territory had been far more valuable than Russia had anticipated and he'd lost both a source of revenue and a foothold in North America in case of potential war.

Regardless, Russia knew that Alaska was now one of America's states and America would never give it up now. Russia did have to wonder what little Alaska was like, though. Was Alaska a boy or a girl? Did Alaska look like America or like Russia or neither? Was Alaska happy as an American state? Did Alaska hate Russia for selling him or her, especially for such a paltry sum of money? The states did seem to have very powerful memories of events that transpired in their lands before they were born.

Russia figured he would simply hope for the best.

SMASH!

"Big Brother!"

Maybe he should go do some reconnaissance work? Even if Alaska hated him and decided to have him arrested for trespassing, it would surely be better than his present alternative of staying put and waiting for Belarus to get him.

China had no idea what was with these young Western nations. Especially America.

Honestly, fifty children? China was fond of children, himself, but to have had fifty? Additionally, America had territories and former territories; though, in China's experience, Philippines referred to
America as her "mentor" rather than her "father," so he assumed that was the relationship with the others.

Still, China had to admit it was actually quite impressive that America, someone so young and inexperienced, had managed to raise such a large family. Of course, he was also feeling somewhat – a tiny bit, really – envious. After all, what made America so special that his states were personified? Well, the other two North American nations had children, as well, but China hadn't met any of them (though he was already certain they were far better behaved than America's unruly brood). China had been alive for thousands of years, though, and his provinces weren't personified. Granted, he had Hong Kong and Macau and Tibet and that disobedient little upstart Taiwan who, in China's opinion, should really just come home already. But it just wasn't the same.

China's provinces used to be personified, long before China had become the unified country he was now. It was much like how Germany came into being, when all the separate states joined to become a single nation. Technically speaking, though, China was, himself, formerly a province and had simply annexed his brothers and sisters. There were seven of them, originally, and China (whose name at the time was "Qin") had decided things would be run more effectively if he was in charge. His siblings had not wanted to remain with him and so allowed themselves to fade away, no longer strong enough to maintain their existences as distinct kingdoms. Even then, though, China had hoped that the provinces would all be reborn.

But they hadn't. And China had to face everything alone.

That was why he clung to his little siblings so fiercely. And why he was inwardly a bit resentful of America having children. Though, he would admit to himself – never publicly, but to himself – that America was obviously not so completely irresponsible. America's states might be insane and, from what China had witnessed, woefully ill-mannered, but it was clear that America was a caring father and knew enough to keep his children from causing any irreparable damage.

At least he could put those thoughts aside, now that he was home.

"Hong Kong, I'm back, aru," he called out. Hong Kong was the only one of his little siblings currently residing at his house (Macau was away on business, Tibet stayed tucked away in his monastery, and Taiwan had moved out ages ago).

No response. How disrespectful!

China made his way inside, walking in the direction of Hong Kong's room. As he approached, he heard the sound of Hong Kong's voice. Opening the door to the room rather forcefully (it was China's house, after all, and privacy was determined by whether or not China was in the mood to allow it), China's mouth fell open in shock. Hong Kong was on a FaceTime chat on his computer… with that New York boy.

The two were speaking rather intensely in Mandarin, but seemed to switch to Cantonese every now and then and throw in random English words just to make their conversation even more complex.

"So how long did those pills keep you, like, out of it?" Hong Kong asked.

"Eighteen straight hours," said New York. "And, yo, man, I had to use the can so bad when I woke up. And it turned out that New Jersey drew on my face in sharpie, too."

"How are you feeling, though?"

"Actually…not bad. My blood pressure is down."
"You don't think your sister would, like, mind if I acquired some of those pills, too, do you?"

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE, ARU?!" China screamed.

"Yo, is that your old man?" said New York.

"The oldest one there is," said Hong Kong. "Hello, China."

"Answer my question, aru!" China continued. "What is going on?!"

"I'm, like, Facetiming with New York."

"I can see that's what you are doing! What I want to know is 'why,' aru!"

"Because we're, like, friends."

"Since when?!"

"Uh, twenty years ago?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," said New York.

"You stay out of this," China snapped at the American before rounding on Hong Kong. "You mean to tell me that you knew about America's states this whole time and you didn't tell me, aru?!"

"You mean to tell me that you nations, like, didn't know about them? Me, Taiwan, and Macau did."

"It's a conspiracy! I am being undermined by my own family, aru!"

China stormed out of the room, leaving Hong Kong and New York staring after him.

"Well," said Hong Kong after a lengthy silence. "If he reacted that badly to us being friends, imagine how he'll be when he, like, finds out about Macau and Nevada."

Japan was very tired when he stepped into his house.

It wasn't just the long flight that had bothered him. There was something weighing deeply on his thoughts.

He had long considered the possibility of his friend America having personified states. After all, Japan, himself, had personified prefectures. They functioned like his assistants and advisors. They deferred to him, but he still held their views in high regard. They were not children, however, and Japan could not exactly claim having any hand raising them.

So, America having states did not surprise Japan. What surprised Japan was that those states were literally America's children. That they had been 'born' when the lands were officially recognized as states of the Union.

It raised a very important question in Japan's mind. What had happened to Hawaii?

Japan had known the island kingdom ages ago. A proud and stubborn girl, but also one who was very strong and capable. At one point, Japan's leaders had considered an arranged marriage between the two of them to create a powerful force that could control the Pacific region. The talks fell through, however, and the American overthrow of the Hawaiian government and seizure of the islands ensured no such alliance would be made.
Japan had assumed that Hawaii, after being admitted as an American state, had either become like Japan's prefectures or had faded away.

It left him to wonder just what had happened to the girl. America had said the states were 'born' after being admitted, so what did that mean, exactly, for the former kingdom? Had she been dissolved and replaced by a new Hawaii? That seemed the most likely explanation. If that had happened, Japan knew America would surely feel horrible about having done that to someone. Japan knew, firsthand, that while America was capable of doing terrible things when provoked, he was truly a good person at heart and carried guilt for past mistakes long after the person he'd hurt had forgiven him.

Hawaii was still a puzzling question. What had happened to that former kingdom? Did the present-day Hawaii remember the Hawaiian Kingdom (and, for a brief period, the Hawaiian Republic)? Had Hawaii still been alive when Japan had launched the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Japan was not entirely certain if he wanted to know the answer.

Romano gave Veneziano another slap upside the head.

His little brother had been prattling the entire trip home about how America had "Italian" states and that it was like the two of them were uncles or something. That spectacle on the last day of the conference had given Romano a headache. While it was true that he found it remarkable that America's states should be personified and that at least one of them bore a striking familial resemblance to the Italian brothers (two, if one counted the fact that the England lookalike had an Italian hair-curl), he did not understand why Veneziano had to make a big deal out of it.

Those children were *not* their family. They simply enjoyed the benefits of Italian influence as a result of immigration. *That was all.*

Romano tried to ignore the niggling feeling at the back of his skull that told him that, yes, there were some real ties between Italy and America. Even the name "America" derived from "Amerigo," the name of the Italian man who officially recognized America as a previously unknown continent; Columbus may have "discovered" the Americas (in the loosest sense of the word "discovered" as there were already people there), but he insisted until the day he died that the Americas were simply the Indies.

But that didn't mean *anything*!

Still, no matter what Romano said, it did not deter his younger brother's enthusiasm. It seemed Veneziano thought it was absolutely wonderful that America had children (conveniently forgetting that those same children likely had access to nuclear weapons that could crush any countries that got on their bad side) and that it meant there were more people in the world who likely enjoyed pasta.

At least the revelation had made the Potato-Bastard miserable.

Romano had to admit that seeing that one state, New York, nearly drop Germany out of that window had really made the entire stupid conference worthwhile. Though Romano felt it would have been better if the boy had gone through with it and allowed Germany to fall.

Veneziano had said that Germany told him he had no desire to get involved in the headache of interacting with America's states. It seemed that Germany was not only worried about potentially meeting New York again, but that if America's states could hold onto grudges from two hundred years ago, they could very well bear some ill-will towards former Axis members. And Germany was not about to let them have the chance to get some revenge on him for past transgressions; it was bad
enough living with neighbors who thought he was going to try invading them again any day (like Romano, who was still sending death threats regularly).

While he would never, ever admit that he agreed with Germany on anything, Romano grudgingly conceded that he may have a point about the American states. Romano and Veneziano had a fairly good relationship with America (Hamburger-Bastard though he was, America was all right, in Romano's opinion), but America's children were an unknown factor. And Romano wasn't comfortable with unknowns.

He wouldn't say anything against America's states, of course. He wasn't stupid or suicidal. But he did worry that, eventually, Veneziano might say or do something that would offend or anger the Americans and get the two of them on the shit-list they had, so far, appeared to have avoided.

"If you don't make the call, brother, then I will do it, myself."

"No."

Netherlands snatched the phone out of Belgium's hands. Belgium pouted and rested her hands on her hips, clearly impatient. They had been arguing for over an hour about calling America. While Belgium had been thrilled to realize that America's son, New York, was the present-day Nieuw Nederland, as she saw it as finding long-lost family, the Netherlands had been incredibly reluctant to try and connect with his former colony.

"I don't see what the problem is, brother," Belgium said. "I would have thought you'd be leaping at the chance to meet our...I suppose 'nephew' is the most applicable term in this situation. You both clearly have a great deal in common, already."

Netherlands remained silent and kept his face stern. Belgium could definitely see the resemblance New York had with her brother. Some of their features may be different, but there are some things which are simply genetically hard-wired.

"Just make the call, brother. Why are you so nervous?"

Belgium had never seen her brother look so uncertain and conflicted. He was normally so tough and straightforward that Belgium had long wondered if there was anything that could get through that harsh outer shell he liked to wear.

"What if...what if he thinks...that I'm not worth the trouble?"

Belgium blinked in astonishment as she realized what was wrong. Her brother was very reluctant to open up to others, which unfortunately made him come across as cold and unsociable. His founding of Nieuw Nederland had been an attempt to make something purely his, something like himself that he wouldn't have to worry would ever turn on him or look down on him for being a self-made man (he had risen out of poverty to become a powerful force, in his own right, but many of the other nations at the time sneered at those who did not come from established backgrounds). It had been his way of showing the rest of the European countries that, yes, he could compete with any one of them in anything, including having colonies.

When he'd gotten into that struggle with England for control of the land, Netherlands had been forced to yield his claims to America. While Netherlands had gone on to establish colonies elsewhere, the connection wasn't quite the same.

That was why he was so nervous about reaching out to this former colony. He was afraid of being rejected.
"I don't see why he would think that," said Belgium with a kind smile. "If you're concerned about it, at the very least you will be able to talk about business."

Netherlands took a steadying breath. Yes, that was correct. He and Nieuw Nederl– New York shared an interest in making money. If worse came to worst, that was always a decent default topic for conversation. So, he held up the phone he still held clutched in his hand and dialed.

"Hallo, America," he said. "This is Netherlands. I was wondering if I could speak to you about something."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
Yay! Scotland made his way into the fic! I love finding good fics with Scotland in them. You know, the Scots contributed a lot to American independence. Many of the Founding Fathers were of Scottish descent. The famous commander of the Continental navy, John Paul Jones, was a Scottish immigrant to America. The Declaration of Independence was partly inspired by the Scottish Declaration of Arbroath. Heck, numerous American states have their own, officially-recognized state tartans. Of course, I am using the accepted fanon Scotland, Allistor Kirkland.

The exploding package – Montana is known infamously as the base of operations of the Unabomber (Ted Kaczynski), so I imagine her making explosives in a shed out in the woods and sending them to people. She doesn't do it maliciously, it's just how she shows affection; everyone in the family knows to get the heck out of dodge before the bombs go off. Her sending England an exploding package is actually a sign that she doesn't hate him (you don't even want to know what she does to people she hates).

I think France nitpicks about Canada's French. Canadian French (Québécois) is different than the French spoken in France. As are the French dialects in America.

The "unpleasant business" in the 1860s that France is referring to is the Second French Intervention in Mexico, in which Napoleon III invaded Mexico and installed his cousin Maximilian as "emperor" of Mexico. The French eventually had to withdraw, because the American Civil War ended and the American government had begun to send troops, supplies, and ammunition to help the Mexicans retake control of their country. Cinco de Mayo commemorates the day the Mexican troops defeated the French at the Battle of Puebla.

Back in the 1700s-early 1900s, the U.S. and Russia were pretty friendly with each other. Russia even sent supplies and weapons to the Union during the American Civil War.

I've decided that, while the other big countries never knew about the states, a bunch of the small countries and districts and so forth did. So, New York and Hong Kong are friends, and Macau and Nevada have a relationship that will be brought up later. The idea came from a FanFiction reviewer, AquaEclipse.

The past relationship between Japan and Hawaii, including the proposed "arranged marriage," is a reference to the time when Hawaii was its own kingdom. Hawaii was seized by the United States after the overthrow of Queen Liliʻuokalani. Her niece,
Ka‘iulani, was heiress to the throne and there were talks, before the overthrow, of Ka‘iulani marrying a Japanese prince to form an alliance with Japan.

America was named after Amerigo Vespucci. American-Italian relations have been really good for a long time. Italian is the seventh-largest ancestry group in the United States. Italy is one of the most favored tourist destinations for Americans (I got to go as a gift from my parents following my graduation from high school; it is an absolutely beautiful, wonderful country and I would go there again in a heartbeat). America is also one of the top producers of pasta in the world (we're second only to Italy, itself).

The line about being 'looked down on' for not having an 'established background' is a reference to how, in European history, people in the aristocracy turned their noses up at people who made money through their own hard work rather than from inherited titles. I see the Netherlands, a nation who relied on himself to make money and build his own reputation, as someone who had to deal with scorn from some of the other European nations because he had to work in order to get where he was while the rest of them had "inherited" the means of living comfortably (we see in Hetalia that "inheritance" refers to fertile lands and lots of natural resources).
America Takes Requests

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

America stared at the Thirteen and the Thirteen stared back. Vermont was there, too, but no one noticed him except for America and New Hampshire. Sometimes Connecticut would notice Vermont existed, but that was usually only to order Vermont to get him some coffee or read his to-do list for him.

"No more, dudes," America said firmly. "After the Tea Party incident, I want no more crazy attacks on England."

Virginia, the Carolinas, New Jersey, New York, and the New Englanders all began trying to argue. Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Georgia just sat in polite silence. Maryland had worked out her issues after getting to punch England in the stomach, so she was good. Delaware decided that she wasn't interested in causing potential international conflicts, so she was out. Pennsylvania's and Georgia's motives were less readily apparent, but neither of them was presently inclined towards violence.

The others, however…well, they would just have to learn that one cannot try to bring back two-hundred-year-old conflicts, especially against allies. America would also be having a few words with some of his younger children about forgiveness, but the Thirteen (plus Vermont) were the current principle threat to international relations.

"I mean it, dudes," America continued. "I know we've had problems in the past-"

"That's puttin' it mildly, Pa," said North Carolina.

"-But this isn't the eighteenth century. Or the nineteenth, for that matter."

South Carolina glared and muttered something under her breath that prompted Virginia to elbow her sharply.

"What was that, Jessie?" said America.

"I said, 'If Ma was still here, she wouldn't have minded,'" she replied with a touch of heat in her tone.

The other states paled and started shaking their heads. America had tensed and his expression became rather strained. There were a few subjects that were not to be brought up in family discussions (things like politics, religion, sports, cereal, whose car racing was better, why Nevada had bite marks on her neck and was walking funny, etc.). This was one of them. And South Carolina was well-aware of that fact.

Thankfully, further argument was prevented by the sound of a phone ringing. Everyone whipped out their devices and began checking them.

"It's mine!" New Jersey exclaimed, happy for the interruption. "'Ey, what's happenin'? Oh, 'ey, Allie. What, for real? You kick his ass? Ah, cool. Okay, I'll tell Pops." She clicked her phone off and turned to America. "Alaska says she spotted that Ruski guy prowlin' 'round at her place."

"Russia?" America said worriedly. "Is Alaska okay? Does she need me to come over?"
America didn't notice the rest of the kids exchange disbelieving looks. As if Alaska, of all people, needed any help to fend off intruders.

"Nah, she's fine. Montana was with her. Alaska just wanted to brag 'bout how good she's gettin' at throwin' grenades."

The other states shuddered. Alaska plus Montana plus grenades only ever equaled trouble.

"Well, that's a relief," America said, smiling obliviously. His good mood was back as though nothing was wrong. "Anyway, dudes, I'm serious about the 'no more picking on England' stuff. One more incident, and we're talking budget cuts and cellphone confiscations."

There was a chorus of horrified gasps. New York and New Jersey clutched their cellphones protectively.

"Come on, dudes, I don't want to be the bad guy, here," America added. "You don't see any of your cousins pulling stunts like this."

"We have cousins?" said New York, his brow furrowing in confusion.

Massachusetts slapped him upside the head.

"Uncle Mattie's kids, you retahd," he said.

"Doesn't ring a bell. And don't say 'retard,' it offends people."

Massachusetts gave New York a flat stare. Since when had his brother ever worried about not offending people? It was bad enough when he tried to get them to use a bunch of made-up pronouns. Sometimes he wondered if New York was just doing things like that to screw with them.

"You live next door to Ontario and Quebec," said Maryland. "How can you keep forgetting?"

"Because he barely acknowledges that we exist, Mary," said Virginia. "He probably doesn't even know where we are on the map."

"Yo, I abject to that," said New York. "That's nothin' but perjury."

"All right, first of all, it's I object to that. Second, the correct word would be 'slander,' not 'perjury.' Third, prove it. Look at this map and tell me where I am."

Virginia withdrew a map of the United States and held it up for New York to see. New York scoffed at her.

"Do I look like a fifth-grader?" he said.

Rhode Island fake-coughed the word "dropout." New York heard it and glared at him.

"Come on, guys, knock it off," America said calmly. "Now, will you all agree to tone down the revenge schemes?"

The states agreed with varying amounts of enthusiasm.

"Great. That's all I wanted to know."

The states began to get up from their seats and head for the door.
"Oh, York, Jersey, I just want to talk to you about something before you guys go."

"Whatever it is," said New Jersey. "It's New York's fault."

Before New York could voice another protest in his defense, America shook his head.

"No, it's nothing bad. It's just, I got a call from the Netherlands, earlier."

New York and New Jersey exchanged looks.

"He and his sister Belgium were hoping to meet New Netherland."

"Shouldn't Penny be here, too, then?" said New Jersey. "Connecticut and Delaware, heck, even Rhode Island, also have former New Netherland territory."

"Not like you two, though."

"I…suppose it would be fine. York?"

New York shrugged.

"'Long as I don't miss any conferences or nothin'," he said. "Sure, I guess. Are any of the others gonna be havin' family reunions or whatever the hell this is, too?"

"I guess it depends," said America.

"You takin' requests, then, Pops?" New Jersey said with a wry smile.

"Heh, maybe. Then again, this is the first one I've gotten."

"New York and the Three Idiots probably scared the rest of the nations off. I know I wanna run when I see their faces."

As it happened, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island were within hearing range of that comment, as they had lingered in order to eavesdrop on the conversation. They were not exactly thrilled by what they heard.

"Bitch!" the three shouted. As did New York.

"Shoobies!" New Jersey retorted with a triumphant smirk.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Vermont is woefully underappreciated and ignored, just like his Uncle Canada. I love Vermont, though. Vermont is cool.

New York occasionally forgets that his cousins and siblings exist, because he's so amazing why would you need anyone else? Well, in his opinion, anyway. This is generally cured by a smack upside the head.

"Shoobie" is a southern New Jersey slang word used to insult summertime/day trip tourists (usually those from states further north).
Born in the USA

Chapter Notes

I'm sure some folks from New Jersey will get the reference in the title.

Warning: A slight injection of cuteness. Because anything with Belgium involved is going to be sweet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Officially, Belgium and Netherlands were there to discuss EU business with representatives for the United States. In reality, they were on their way, per the arrangement with America, to meet Nieuw Nederland at a place called 'Coney Island.' The name might have been anglicized, but Netherlands was positive it was the site of Konijnen Eiland, or "Conyne Eylandt" as he had called it at the time, a part of the original settlement he had built.

As the taxi pulled to a stop and the two nations got out of the vehicle, Netherlands had to admit that it was considerably different from what he remembered. The formerly desolate and inconsequential little island was now a bustling collection of amusement parks and beach resorts…it was also no longer an island. Belgium seemed enthusiastic, but Netherlands was feeling a little uncomfortable (his wallet was practically screaming at him to leave now before he got tricked into spending money).

"Oh, I think I see him," Belgium said cheerfully. She grabbed Netherlands' arm and began to drag him with her. "Come along, big brother."

Sure enough, there was the teenage boy they'd seen nearly drop Germany out of a ten-story window. He wasn't wearing the baseball cap, this time, so it was easier to see the resemblance between him and Netherlands. Really, the only physical difference between the two of them was complexion and hair and eye colors. And age, obviously.

As the two nations drew closer, they noticed that New York was not alone. Beside him was a teenage girl.

"'Ey, youse guys Mr. Netherlands and Miss Belgium?" said the girl.

"Uh, yes, we are," Belgium said, with a note of confusion.

"You've met York, I guess? Markus, say 'hi' to the nice people."

"Hey," New York said noncommittally. "And, for the millionth time, sis, it's 'Mark,' now."

"I'm New Jersey," the girl continued, ignoring her brother. "Elsje Jones, but everyone calls me 'Elsie.' And we are the former colony of New Netherland."

Netherlands had been expecting one former colony. He wasn't disappointed that there were two of them, though. He was just a little surprised. What was even more surprising was the fact that the girl looked like Belgium.

All right, maybe not exactly like Belgium. Actually, if Netherlands didn't know that she was one of
America's children, he would have thought his little sister had somehow had a lovechild with one of the Italy brothers. New Jersey had the same dark blonde hair and cat-like smile as Belgium, but her eyes were brown and she had an Italian curl poking out from under a backwards-turned baseball cap. She had a small scuff-mark on her cheek, too. She was also dressed in a very tomboyish manner, with faded jeans, worn-out sneakers, and an oversized, orange and blue t-shirt showing a man with an electric guitar and "THE BOSS" written on it; she was also wearing a leather jacket that inexplicably had a bunch of zippers randomly sewn onto it.

"So," Netherlands said, "why did you wish to meet at an amusement park?"

"This isn't just any amusement park," New York said, sounding somewhat offended. "This is Luna Park. Even Noo Joisey, over here, can't say anything bad about it."

New Jersey, however, had directed a furious look at her brother and was even baring her teeth at him.

"I've told you never to call me 'Joisey,'" she said. "You know I hate that. No one on my turf calls me that. Only idiots from Brooklyn call me that."

Before New York could erupt in a tirade about why folks from Brooklyn were wonderful and throw in a few scathing comments about how Camden was a hellhole, Belgium politely decided to intervene.

"It is a very lovely amusement park," she said. "It reminds me a bit of some of the festivals I have back at my place."

"Ah, well, thanks," New York said, his temper calming. "It's taken a lot of work. Especially after the original one burned down. Anyway, let's get goin'. Me and Els' have lifetime VIP membership passes and we can bring guests, so we don't need any tickets or nothin'."

The day went about as one would expect. Or not. It depends on whether or not one expected Netherlands to scream like a little girl on the rollercoasters, Belgium to win at all the park games, New Jersey to giggle like a little child while on the B&B carousel, and New York to occasionally slip into monologues about how such-and-such thing was better "back in the old days."

As Belgium had expected, her brother and New York got on incredibly well. While the two of them were a little awkward around each other, at first, they both shared a love for enterprise (specifically, the monetary aspect of enterprise), they both had a sense for calling people out on "bullshit" as New York eloquently put it, they both appreciated anything young and pretty in a skirt (as long as that "anything" wasn't related to them), they both walked very quickly and got impatient when their respective sisters couldn't keep up the pace, and they were both a little insecure around each other.

New York, it seemed, had been having similar worries about what Netherlands would think of him to what Netherlands had been worried about in meeting New York. To New York, Netherlands was an older, experienced nation who probably wouldn't think much of a state who had to build himself up from the little dingy port cities and farming villages that once comprised the former colony. To the Netherlands, New York was a world-renowned and widely-regarded place, featured in countless books and films, practically a household name and part of the leading superpower that was the United States and who probably didn't care about any "Old World" nations that hadn't been part of his life.

New Jersey and Belgium both thought it was kind of adorable.

Even New Jersey, herself, seemed to have inherited some traits from "Uncle Netherlands" and got
his attention the instant she mentioned gardening. Netherlands loved gardening. New Jersey was the Garden State.

That didn't mean New Jersey and Belgium had nothing in common, though. On the contrary, the two of them shared a very cheeky sense of humor, they were both a bit picky about food and would not eat certain things that weren't made either by them or by their people (Belgium had her waffles, New Jersey had her bagels and pizza), and they both cared very much about their brothers while still having some strong opinions about their behavior.

"Markus has always been a bit of a stingy hard-ass," New Jersey said to Belgium while the two of them watched from a distance as New York and Netherlands argued with the man at the ring-toss game about whether or not the thing was rigged. "It was bad enough when we were young, but, ever since the Great Depression, he's got it in his head that if he stops workin' for too long then the whole world will explode and everyone will die."

"Surely he doesn't think that's actually his fault?" said Belgium.

"He's got this sayin'. 'Keep your eyes on the prize.' He took his eyes off Wall Street and the whole thing collapsed out from under him. He doesn't handle failure well. And dealin' in that kind work is always risky. Personally, I've never been much into the whole stock market thing. I prefer to make the things people want."

"Oh, really? What type of things do you make?"

"Well, I always really liked trains and ships. I had them everywhere back in the old Industrial days and it was really upsettin' when they became less important. Really, though, I just love science and makin' things work. Helpin' people advance into the future."

"That sounds wonderful, Elsje. The world needs intelligent people who want to change things for the better."

"Thank you," New Jersey said with a grateful smile. "Some people don't always think highly of girls who like science. I tried to get into 'girly' things like sewin' and stuff. I even started a beauty pageant to show I could do the whole frilly dress and makeup thing like my sisters. It's all right, I guess, but it just…it wasn't what I really wanted to do with my time."

Belgium gave her a kind and reassuring look.

"If you enjoy something, especially something important like science, you shouldn't feel guilty about it," she said. "Anyone who discourages you from your dreams is not worth your time."

"Heh, you're startin' to sound like my dad."

"Well, your father is right if he tells you that. From what I have heard from him in the past, I believe you likely got your love for science from him."

"I guess I did…but I got my pretty face from my favorite auntie."

Belgium giggled and New Jersey gave a snicker. A sense of camaraderie had formed between the nation and the state, the beginnings of a kind of familial bond. When Netherlands and New York rejoined the ladies, there was the hint of a similar connection starting to form between them; both of them were also speaking only in Dutch, as well. New Jersey thought that was interesting as New York hadn't spoken in complete Dutch since sometime in the 1920s; before that, both New York and New Jersey spoke in Dutch all the time, but there had been a push to elevate English as the common language of the land and so the two of them had simply stopped using it.
About the rest of their day at Coney Island, not much need be said. New York insisted on getting hotdogs, which Belgium and Netherlands, as nations with high standards for food, regarded with a measure of trepidation, as they had little experience with American cuisine. They were relieved, however, when they realized that hotdogs were simply a version of frankfurter sausages. They had been a teeny, tiny bit misled and off-put by the name.

"So, how did it go?" America asked when New York and New Jersey returned.

They were currently staying at the old brownstone house that the family kept in New York City. America had acquired it back in the nineteenth century, after the old house got too cramped for a growing family and new regulations prevented them from expanding it. The brownstone was a fairly simple building, but very warm and familiar and homey on the inside.

"Yeah, yeah, fine," New York mumbled as he took a seat in a nearby armchair and started checking the messages on his cellphone. "Must do it again, real soon." He frowned at a long series of texts from one person whose name was only vaguely familiar. "Hey, do either of you know who this 'Ontario' guy is who keeps messagin' me?"

New Jersey rolled her eyes at New York and then gave her father a smile and a playful punch to the shoulder by way of greeting.

"They were nice," she said. "I liked Belgium a lot. She said she'd send me some homemade chocolates. And Netherlands said he'd like to see some of my landscapin' ideas."

"Well, I'm glad you kids had fun," America said fondly.

"I'm just wonderin' if we should invite them out to Mitch's place next May," said New York, still not looking up from his phone. "If Uncle Netherlands liked Joisey's fondness for gardinin', I wonder how he'll react to Michigan's Tulip Time Festival."

America had to physically restrain New Jersey when she made an attempt to lunge for her brother upon hearing that hated moniker he so continuously insisted on giving her. She flailed and thrashed and made gestures like she would gladly rip New York's throat out if she got her hands on him. New York just continued checking his phone in a state of complete obliviousness.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: For those who aren't from New Jersey, both the title and the t-shirt that NJ was wearing are references to Bruce Springsteen.

I've decided that New Jersey looks a lot like Belgium because the Latin name for "New Netherland" is "Nova Belgica/Novum Belgium." Netherlands and Belgium were once two parts of the same country but eventually separated; New York and New Jersey were both part of the same colony but eventually separated. Life's little ironies, eh?

New Jersey's actual human name is "Elsje," but her family anglicizes it to "Elsie." New York changed his own name from "Markus" to "Mark" in order to sound more 'American.' New Jersey prefers to use everyone's real names, as some of their other siblings also don't accept their original names.
The zippers on New Jersey's jacket are a reference to the fact that the zipper was first mass-produced in the state (the company was started in Chicago but moved to Hoboken; after that it got relocated to Meadowville, PA). It was technically invented by a man from Chicago, Whitcomb Judson, but I think that New Jersey considers herself the "birthplace" of the zipper.

Coney Island's name, both in Dutch and English, means "Rabbit Island." Hetalia's Netherlands likes rabbits. Baby America was cuddling a rabbit when he met England (which is a joke in Japanese because USA is an abbreviation of the Japanese word for "rabbit"). Is anyone else following the same train of thought that I am?

Never…and I cannot stress this enough…never call New Jersey "Noo Joisey" in front of someone from that state. Apparently, it's common for people from Brooklyn to call New Jersey that, according to something I read by someone from New Jersey.

Camden is a city in New Jersey which is infamous for its crime rate, so I figure New York tries to bring it up when his sister insults any of his places.

While New York and New Jersey do care about each other, that won't stop them from trying to push each other's buttons. Immediate intervention needs to be made sometimes so things don't escalate into a fistfight.

I also see New York as having a few insecurities, despite his worldwide fame. He used to be pretty low-rent and poor, riddled with dirty port cities and plagued with conflict. New York was, from very early on, derided by the other colonies/states as a hotbed of deviant behaviors, including prostitution, gambling, drinking, and drug use. New York's rise to power came from the strategic placement of New York City as a port (open to international trade only after America became independent, as Britain forbade the colonies from trading with anywhere other than Britain) and the creation of the national bank.

I read on Belgium's profile that she won't eat waffles made by other countries, only Belgian waffles (perfectly understandable, as I'm pretty sure any waffles not made in Belgium are just naturally inferior). People from New Jersey have a whole list of things they won't eat anywhere else (bagels, pizza, corn, tomatoes, and saltwater taffy).

New Jersey has always been really big on producing goods and inventing things. Thomas Edison's Menlo Park is located in NJ (Edison was also of Dutch descent). I see New Jersey, in addition to experimenting with medicines, as being a bit of a tinkerer and just someone who prefers to make things than deal with the corporate stuff that New York is involved in. As the Garden State, New Jersey also loves plants and is usually called in by her siblings if they ever need landscaping advice. During the Industrial Revolution, New Jersey was a big producer of textiles, hence the "sewing" comment. New Jersey is also the home of the Miss America Pageant.

Dutch used to be commonly spoken in New York and parts of New Jersey all the way up into the early 20th century. Then it just started falling out of common use and schools began pushing English-only instruction.

Michigan has the largest population of Dutch-Americans in the U.S. and Holland, Michigan hosts a big tulip festival.
Chapter Notes

"We are not makers of history. We are made by history."
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Let it simply be put, for this chapter, that the Europeans weren't the only ones to have an impact on America.

It was just a matter of simple fact that America was fiercely protective of his children.

He knew they could look out for themselves most of the time, but the "dad" part of his brain couldn't help but want to keep his babies safely guarded from anything that could harm them physically, mentally, or emotionally. The Civil War hadn't done anything to help that concern. In fact, it just made it worse.

He tried not to let his fears of how people would treat his children affect him, which was why he'd never actively kept his children a secret from the rest of the world. It was just that he had seen so much anger, hatred, and violence in his life that he wanted to shield them from the coldness and cruelty that people were capable of as much as he could, even while still trying to give them as much freedom as possible. The fact that American society had become one of overwhelming political correctness only served to make America very, very aware of anything that could be even slightly offensive and caused his overprotective father side to be in full-force should anyone say or do anything that might be construed as a threat to the wellbeing of his children.

Not the best situation for a country with access to nuclear weapons.

It was a United Nations meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, a few months after the meeting in New York where all the crazy hijinks had occurred involving the revelation of America's states.

This new conference was going about as well as could be expected. The nations were shouting at and threatening each other, for the most part. Kenya, the host of the meeting, was, herself, incredibly frustrated by quite a few fellow nations; Somalia, in particular, was getting under her skin with his comments, and the Sudan twins were causing a huge ruckus in their attempts to stab each other.

Kenya tried to ignore it as best she could.

"Pardon me," said a soft, sweet voice from behind her.

Kenya turned in her chair and saw a teenage girl standing there, smiling pleasantly. She was rather pretty, with her big blue eyes and her black hair styled in elegant ringlets and her light pink dress.

"Not to be a bother or nothin'," the girl continued, "but I'm lookin' for my daddy. The United States."

Kenya, like all the other countries, had been witness to the revelation of the existence of America's
children. She and quite a few of her fellow African nations had been happy for America, as they considered him a friend and an important trade partner, and simply shrugged off the news as interesting but not as earthshattering as some of the European and Asian countries seemed to consider it. As far as they were concerned, it wasn't really their business (though, Morocco did send America 'much belated' congratulatory card; after all, those two had a very old friendship, what with Morocco being the first nation to recognize America's independence).

"He's down there," Kenya said, pointing towards one of the tables further down.

"Thank you, Ma'am," the girl said.

Kenya just shrugged, feeling as though there was something about the polite, little American girl that she'd missed, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Oh well, if it had been important then she would have taken note of it. She simply turned her attention to separating Ethiopia and Eritrea when the two women began clawing at each other's faces like a pair of angry cats.

America was in the middle of facing off against Russia over accusations of the large, Slavic nation's hacking of American websites and possible interference in American elections, when he was interrupted by someone gently clearing their throat behind him. America whirled around and his annoyed expression melted away into one of pleasant surprise at the sight of his daughter Georgia.

"Georgie!" he said, pulling her into a hug. "How are you, sweetheart? When did you get here?"

"Hiya, Daddy, I just got in," she said. "I'm sorry for interruptin' and all, but I heard you was havin' one of your meetin's and wanted to let you know I'd be here for a few days. Cali and I are recordin' a few videos and thangs for a documentary, so I thought I'd drop in to let you know where we was."

Quite a few other nations had stopped to look at the newest of America's states to manifest in their midst. They could understand the previous few states and their unique appearances and personalities, what with the states having connections to past European colonies. Even Rhode Island's similarity to Southern Italy could be explained by the role Italian explorers played in the discovery and mapping of America's lands. But this new girl left them deeply confused and somewhat apprehensive about how to broach the awkward question that they all secretly wanted to ask.

"Everyone, this is my daughter Belle Jones, the state of Georgia," America said with a bright smile.

"America," England said uncertainly, "I'm not sure how to ask this, but why is your daughter...well...why is your daughter..."

"What?"

"Why is your daughter black?"

America's eyes narrowed and the temperature in the room suddenly seemed to plummet.

"Does it matter?" America said.

"No! Of course not," England said hastily. "I was just curious."

"If it doesn't matter, then why are you curious?"

Georgia tried not to roll her eyes. It wouldn't be ladylike to do so. Her father always made a big deal out of situations like this. It had been a reasonable question, she supposed, as she did not exactly look a great deal like her father, save for her blue eyes and her all-American smile, or like any of the Europeans as quite a few of the Original Thirteen did. She was the first one of America's children to
be dark-skinned and had had to deal with the discrimination that came with it for longer than any of her younger siblings with similar complexions. So she knew the difference between intentional cruelty and simple poor wording.

She also figured it wasn't her daddy's fault that he was so uppity about being "politically correct" lately, what with all the people getting butt-hurt over the slightest thing. To be honest, Georgia wasn't particularly bothered; she knew there would always be bad people in the world, but there was once a man who now rested deep in her heart who taught her that the best way to fight evil was with love, kindness, and compassion. And she didn't think he'd want her to hold onto any ill feelings, especially over a simple misunderstanding.

"I am what I am, sir," Georgia said politely.

England blinked at her and then backpedaled as he realized how his question could have been construed. He honestly hadn't intended what he'd said to come out the way it had, it was simply that it had been rather shocking to see one of America's daughters, a former English colony, at that, look like she could have just as easily been an African nation were it not for her blue eyes.

"My apologies," he said. "That was incredibly impertinent of me. It is just…I was not expecting…"

Georgia cocked an eyebrow at him.

"What's that, then, sir?" she said. She was barely suppressing a smile. It was so much fun to tease sensitive people like this. "Is there a problem with li'l ole Georgia bein' a bit different?"

England looked mortified. America looked like he was planning where to drop the first nuke.

Georgia just grinned and burst out laughing.

"Bless your heart, darlin', I'm just messin' with you," she said.

"You're not…angry with me?" England said uncertainly. His current standing with the Thirteen was not exactly on a high note, as it was.

"Oh, believe me, there was a time I woulda whooped you good for the trouble you caused Daddy." And she would have, too. As her old colony had been founded by ex-convicts, Georgia knew a few things about fighting. "But some thangs change a gal. And, believe you me, you ain't the worst I seen. From what Daddy's told me, there's even a lot to thank you for. We'd never have ended…that business without you."

England looked up at last, his eyes meeting those bright blue. They almost seemed out-of-place, but, yet, also suited her perfectly. She wasn't looking at him in anger or judgement, but a gentle sort of respect and almost admiration which England had never exactly felt he received from any of his former colonies. England knew exactly what 'that business' was, and it was an enormous relief to know that someone was willing to acknowledge what England had done in the past to stop it.

"What are you guys talking about?" a voice further up called out, breaking the lengthy pause.

Everyone turned and saw Sierra Leone striding up, a confused expression on his face.

"Did I hear you correct?" he said. "I thought you said America has a black daughter."

"Yes," America said, not certain where the other nation was going with his inquiry.

Sierra Leone looked at Georgia for a few seconds before scoffing dismissively.
"This girl isn't black," he said. "She's obviously white."

Everyone looked at him as if they couldn't believe what he'd just said. Georgia was the one most shocked by the strange turn of events.

"Hey, Gambia!" Sierra Leone called up the room.

"What?!" a female African country called back.

"Does this girl look black to you?!"

"No! She's American! She's white!"

Georgia, as astonished as she was by this, actually felt another laugh building up inside her. Never, in her entire life, had anything like this happened before. People were actually arguing about whether or not she was black, just because she was American and not because of what she actually looked like. It was rather surreal. Her poor father, however, looked as though his brain had disconnected.

Georgia smiled, leaned over, and placed a kiss to her father's cheek.

"You take care, now, Daddy," she said. "I'll see you later."

She skipped past the thunderstruck Europeans and made her way back towards the exit. However, one person in the African section caught her notice, though he was clearly trying to stay out of her line of sight.

"James, is that you?" she said.

A young African nation, with a name card labeled "Liberia," stiffened and tried to sink in his seat. While he looked similar in appearance to many of the other nations of the African continent, there was an almost blue tint to his dark grey eyes. Liberia pretended he hadn't heard her, but Georgia frowned and walked over to him.

"James?" she repeated.

Liberia took a deep breath and looked up.

"Hello, Georgia," he said evenly.

"What, don't I get a hug?" she replied.

"I…now is not a good time."

"Aw, what's wrong, hon? We ain't heard from you in ages. Ohio even tells me you ain't been returnin' his calls and he really wanted you to come watch when he takes on Michigan in their next football match."

Quite a few countries took notice of the new conversation. Liberia was looking about in clear discomfort with his present situation. While it wasn't a secret that Liberia was once an American colony, established as a refuge for freed blacks, he tended not to call attention to his past status as one of America's foster kids. Back when Liberia was a child, America used to boast about having a "totally amazing and wonderful colony" who was going to "become a strong, powerful, and freedom-loving nation." It had been a little embarrassing for Liberia, who was rather shy. Now, though, Liberia tried to keep America at a healthy distance so his neighbors would take him seriously as his own country. Plus, there had been that whole civil unrest thing about a decade ago, and the
blood diamonds thing before that, so talking with America had become a bit awkward.

"I'm very busy, at the moment," he said. "And Ohio knows I'm not exactly fond of American football."

"Alrighty, then," Georgia said kindly, though there was a small twitch at the corner of her eye when Liberia expressed his dislike of the sport she was more than a little devoted to. "But don't go makin' yourself a stranger, now. Stop by my place, sometime. I'll make you that fried okra you like."

Liberia nodded mutely and tried to mentally will himself to disappear as Georgia left the conference room. He really didn't need this kind of attention right now. He was not exactly fond of being noticed too much, he only liked recognition when it concerned his achievements, and now everyone was staring at him in a way that showed an interest in personal matters, which he did not enjoy discussing.

"Libéria, mon ami," said Ivory Coast, who was seated right next to him. "You never told moi you had a white sister."

Liberia slammed his head down on the table in front of him.

Georgia found California talking rather incessantly at the driver they'd hired. The man's expression looked a mixture of bored and confused, though California didn't seem to notice this and just kept on with her babbling. Ordinarily, Georgia avoided her younger sister to the far west, because she wasn't about to get mixed up in whatever crazy thing California was going to do next, like banning plastic straws. However, the two of them did share an interest in filmmaking that sometimes drew the two of them together for collaborative work. Georgia usually preferred doing dramas or thrillers, but California had convinced her to help out on a documentary about African wildlife.

"...So I was all, like, 'there's no way I'll mess it up, 'cause I'm just that great,'" California said. "And he was, like, 'Miss Jones, please don't touch that. It's dangerous.' So, you know what I, like, totally did?"

The driver just grimaced and looked like he wished he was anywhere else.

"I, like, totally pressed the button and the whole set, like, totally collapsed. True shiz."

"Okay, hon," said Georgia. "Why don't you let the nice man do his job?"

The driver gave Georgia a grateful look and seized the opportunity to go and start the car.

"I learned somethin' interestin' today, sis," said Georgia as the two girls got into the vehicle.

"Huh? What?" said California.

"Apparently, I'm white."

"Sure, Belle. You can be whatever you want. Race is, like, totally subjective and a social construct and stuff. Like gender. Or whether or not someone, like, has AIDS."

Georgia figured it would be best not to get into those particular arguments. As much as she loved her little sister, the girl was painfully far into the blue zone and was incapable of participating in reasonable debate unless under the effects of large quantities of medication. It was days like this that made Georgia actually wish she was with Florida, instead.
Well…*almost*.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Georgia is a sweet, gentle, kind-hearted state who prefers to look for the best in people. But don't let the pretty, delicate exterior fool you, though; this young lady can kick some serious ass if she needs to, but she prefers to rely on her words and wit to solve problems rather than immediately resorting to violence like some of her siblings.

Georgia was initially founded as a "second chance" colony for former criminals who couldn't get work in Britain. In fact, Georgia even originally had laws prohibiting slavery, but overturned them when a combination of heatwaves and diseases killed off a large percentage of the population and left the colonists desperate to keep their colony alive. Slaves from Africa and indentured servants from Europe (who were often treated on-par with the slaves) were brought in and the colony survived.

The man who rests "in Georgia's heart" is Dr. King, who is buried in Atlanta.

Nairobi, Kenya is home to one of the U.N. headquarters.

A lot of African countries have generally good opinions of the United States because we run a large number of humanitarian efforts and overseas investments that those countries depend on.

When Georgia says there's a lot to thank England for in fighting "that business," she's referring to his quest to end the slave trade. Did you know that England was a fierce opponent of slavery back in the day and was constantly fighting the "Triangle Trade" (as it was called, back then)? I feel that England, the character, has always hated the notion of slavery, as his mother, Britannia, had been enslaved by Rome back in ancient times, and England, himself, had also experienced oppression by foreign powers (Danes, Saxons, Normans) as a child. I actually got the idea to include a reference to this from reading "News Feed" by MayAnny, in the chapter entitled "Nationalist" (that fic is absolutely awesome).

Sierra Leone was a major trading post for slavery and was where many of the slaves sent to the Georgia colony were from (the Gambia and Angola were also principle slave-trading sites).

The African countries refusing to acknowledge that a black American is "black" is totally a thing. My cultural anthropology teacher once went on a trip to an African country (I don't remember which one, but I believe it was in the West African region) with an associate who was black. Everyone in the country called the associate a term which, loosely translated, means "whitey" because he was from America. Apparently, in quite a few African countries, there is a holdover notion from colonial days that professionals from the west are "white" regardless of their actual skin color.

Liberia is an African country which was founded by the United States as a safe haven for freed slaves as part of a "repatriation" of blacks to Africa. It was a very popular concept back in its day, though rife with problems in both the prejudices that drove it (as many white Americans, while opposed to slavery, did consider themselves superior to blacks and wanted them out of America) and the way it was implemented (Liberia
already had native Africans living in the region, and many of the former slaves who moved to Liberia ended up oppressing them). My OC Liberia's human name "James" is a reference to President James Monroe, who established the country (the capital is Monrovia, which is a sister-city to Dayton, Ohio). I headcanon that, while Liberia wasn't "born" like the states, America found him in Africa while building the Liberia colony and looked after him until he was strong enough to fend for himself (and, even then, he protected him from European powers who were trying to encroach on his land).

Georgia has been the site and setting for numerous well-known films and television shows, so I think she likes making films as a side-hobby.

California is pretty far left. I'm not gonna take a side on the whole 'gender is a social construct' debate, I am just reflecting the views associated with the particular states. Georgia is kind of far to the right, so she gets very uncomfortable when California brings up certain topics. California's comment about AIDS is in reference to the fact that, in California, a law was passed that says people are no longer legally required to inform sexual partners of whether or not they have AIDS (or other STDs) before unprotected sex. California has also made it a crime for restaurants to use plastic straws with their drinks (they now use some kind of stupid paper things).

To be honest with you all, I was a bit nervous in posting this chapter as I know there are a lot of people who take any discussion of race completely out of context and misinterpret anything they see just to have something to complain about. But, then, I thought, 'Bless your hearts, darlin's. I did a good job portraying Georgia, if I do say so, myself.'
Georgia wondered for the millionth time how it was that California had managed to rope her into another collaborative project. Perhaps it was just the fact that Georgia hated telling people 'no' and just wanted everyone to get along; it was why she got such terrible headaches whenever it came time for a University of Georgia vs. Georgia Tech football match, because both of them were her teams but they had been fighting for her love since 1893 and didn't seem inclined to stop. She couldn't just pick one or the other and risk disappointing someone.

And when her little sister dropped by her house to ask for her help in making a movie, it was difficult to think of an excuse and face the tears (which Georgia was half-certain California was faking). However, all Georgia wanted right now was to sit in her garden with some homemade cobbler and a glass of sweet tea and listen to the crickets chirping.

She did not want to be trekking miles and miles into sweltering desert heat, lugging tons of video equipment, and listening to California describe how the documentary they were supposed to be making to reflect the beauty of local wildlife and the rich cultural mosaic of the people of the region was now going to be a survival flick. Honestly, it was like Deliverance, all over again.

"And where's that soy latte I asked for, like, twenty minutes ago?" California said.

"Sis, darlin', there ain't no coffee shops in the desert," said Georgia. "I told you that twenty minutes ago when you started screamin' at poor Felipe."

"If Baja California can't do his job, I'm, like, so firing him. I totally can't believe someone with 'California' in his name can't even, like, find a place that sells lattes."

"Mi hermana," said Baja California a little warily. He was a boy physically no older than ten, but he needed a job and his big sister had given him one as her assistant so he had to tread carefully around her. "Please don't be angry with me."

"Felipe, I don't ask for much from you. All I want, every now and again, is a soy latte. Is that, like, too much to ask?"

Baja California Sur glared at her older sister for picking on Baja California. She may have been younger than both of them, in appearance she looked about seven or eight years old, but she got very irritated whenever Alta California acted like this and was sorely tempted to tell her exactly what she thought of her and where she could put her soy lattes.

"Once again, sis," Georgia said slowly and patiently. "This is the desert. You remember, don't you, hon? It's that big thang with lots of sand. The kind of place where they don't have lattes."

"What do you think I am, like, an idiot? Just someone get me that damned latte!"
She stormed off, leaving Georgia with the other two Californias.

"What a puta," said Baja California Sur.

"Teresa!" Baja California said worriedly. "Don't say such things."

"Well, she is! Be a man, Felipe! Stand up to her!"

"I would, but…she scares me."

"Ugh, you have no machismo. Would Nuevo León let anyone order him around?"

"Tejas."

"He's not bringing her soy lattes. Dios mío, you have a degree, why are you working as a coffee boy?"

Baja California muttered something which the two girls didn't quite catch.

"What was that, darlin'?" said Georgia.

"I said it's a visual arts degree, all right?!" he snapped.

"You mean to tell me," said Baja California Sur, her eyes narrowing into slits. "You threw away all that time in advanced mathematics classes, the political science seminars, the internship with Carlos Slim…so you could earn a visual arts degree?!"

"...sí."

Baja California Sur glared at her brother for several seconds and then kicked him in the shin. This was followed by a stream infuriated screaming in Spanish. Georgia just watched the little Mexican girl verbally rip apart her older brother for 'wasting his potential' and wondered if her Canadian cousins ever had to put up with this kind of nonsense.

"You know, Cali, hon," said Georgia. "Maybe it wasn't the best idea to try ridin' a wild zebra."

"But it's, like, just a kind of horse, right? How was I supposed to know it would, like, go crazy like that?"

"...God love you, child."

"How can you say that?! Mentioning God is, like, totally not PC, anymore."

The younger two Californias looked pained. Georgia just winced and internally prayed for her little sister.

"And another thing…where is that lat—ack!" California was suddenly overcome by a coughing fit. Black soot and ashes blew out from her mouth with each gasp and wheeze, causing her to choke.

"Must be the forest fires, again," said Georgia with concern. "Cali, sweetheart, do you need some help?"

"Murgle."

"Is that smoke coming out of her ears?" said Baja California Sur.
"Don't worry, darlin'," said Georgia. "I got you covered."

Georgia grabbed a nearby fire-extinguisher (Georgia had made it a habit to always have one on-hand, considering…) and began dousing her little sister. California began flailing about on the ground under the onslaught of fire-subduing foam, before curling in a little ball and humming Lady Gaga songs to herself.

Georgia shared a look with the two Baja Californias. Perhaps it was time to give California her medication, again? The sane American state took out a piece of paper from her purse and read the instructions which Minnesota had provided for her in case California got out of hand.

*Give her two Thorazine pills. If she won't take them of her own accord, administer by injection of medication from accompanying syringe.*

*Use any means necessary.*

Georgia put down the paper and took out the little orange prescription bottle.

"Hey, Cali, darlin'," she said. "Could you come here a moment?"

"I hope everyone had an enjoyable and productive time at this meeting," said Kenya. She doubted very much that anyone got anything accomplished, but it was expected for the host country to offer a few vague pleasantries at the end of these conferences. "On your way out, please, no one crowd the driveway, I've got workmen coming in to repave it and they need to get their trucks in."

Everyone began to gather their things and share a few words of parting chit-chat with their colleagues. The peace was not to last, however, as the sounds of a girl yelling in protest met their ears.

"NO! I WON'T AND YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!"

The doors slammed open and a teenage girl ran in, waving her arms erratically and screaming as she headed straight for America.

"Daddykins!" she shouted as she tackled the superpower, actually managing to knock him to the floor from the force of her impact. "Tell them I'm, like, not gonna do it."

A very mussed and frazzled Georgia entered the room, followed by two very tired and very annoyed children.

"Sorry about that, Daddy," said Georgia. "Didn't mean to interrupt or nothin', but California, here, is refusin' to take her pills."

The other nations stared in shock at the girl who was sobbing hysterically against America, who was still lying prone on the floor. Everyone recalled that Mexico had mentioned California was one of the children she and America had had together, but the girl certainly didn't look like a Mexican-American lovechild. If anything, she looked more like a Spain and China lovechild. Granted, a Spain-China lovechild with bleached-blonde hair and a little beauty mark under her left eye, but still.

The girl was dressed in a tight-fitted red tank top, black stretch pants, and was missing one of her fancy designer boots.

"I, like, don't wanna take those pills," California wailed. "And you can't make me, you-you…you crazy hillbilly!"
Georgia gave her sister a look as flat as Kansas' chest.

"Angelina, you need to take your meds," America said, gently pushing her off him and getting to his feet.

"But I don't wanna!"

"Cali-"

"What do I, like, have to do to make my point clear? Take off my clothes?"

The other nations stared, some a little more eagerly than was entirely appropriate, as California began to do exactly that. Georgia immediately started struggling with her to keep her from stripping, much to the disappointment of some of the more voyeuristic countries.

"Keep your clothes on, for God's sake, girl!" said Georgia. "What's the one thing I always told you? 'Don't embarrass the family.'"

"NO! No, no, no, no, no!"

The two children which had accompanied Georgia, both of whom looked a bit like California but not as…distinctive, pounced and got her around the legs. California screamed again and began bashing her fists against the floor, leaving rather large cracks in the tile. California managed to wrestle herself out of their grasp and ran over to the nearest table, picked it up with one hand, and tossed it at her family.

Clearly, she had inherited her father's superhuman strength. Unfortunately, she didn't have nearly as much self-restraint as he did (which was quite terrifying as no one really associated America with self-restraint, as it was).

America, Georgia, and the two young kids managed to duck just in time as the table soared towards them, resulting in the thing getting lodged in the wall behind them. California then began kicking at random pieces of furniture and then started banging her head against the other wall.

"What do you think, Daddy?" said Georgia.

"Pride-swallowing time," America said in resignation. He then turned and walked over to Mexico, who had been watching the display with notable disdain. "Uh, hey, Rosa? I don't suppose you…"

"Only because she is my daughter," Mexico said sharply. "You know, she wouldn't be like this if she'd stayed with me."

America bit his tongue, though he did want to defend his parenting skills. He felt that he'd actually done a fairly good job with his kids, but California was just a little difficult. She'd always had a wild and uncontrollable disposition. In fact, when America had initially tried to get his daughter to come home, she'd shot at him and said that no one would ever tell the California Republic what to do again. After a couple weeks (twenty-five days in total) and some arguing and Texas calling her a number of unflattering things, California yielded and agreed to officially join her father's family but put off becoming an official state for a couple years, stringing everyone along with her hemming and hawing and her relentless questioning of what was in it for her.

These days, California wasn't nearly so emotionally complicated. She was just nuts.

"Alta California," Mexico said, pulling her daughter away from the wall which now had a
California gave a wail that shook the entire room. While most of the other countries tried to find cover, Mexico didn't even flinch. Instead, she gently shushed the obviously unhinged girl and said some reassuring things to her in Spanish. California actually seemed to be calming down, somewhat; however, Baja California Sur had taken the opportunity to get the syringe of Thorazine from Georgia, crept up behind her sister, and jabbed the needle into her...in a very uncomfortable place.

"AH! Betrayers! I, like, can't trust anyone! I-"

California's words were cut off as she toppled over face-first onto the floor. Everyone stood at a careful distance from her as she slowly stood up and idly brushed herself off. Her expression was noticeably calmer but tinged with a note of irritation.

"My sincerest apologies, Father," she said stiffly to America. "That was absolutely, unforgivably shameful of me." She gave Mexico a grateful nod. "My thanks, Mother."

"Don't forget, I'm the one who actually shot you full of Thorazine," said Baja California Sur.

"Ah, yes, thank you, Teresa."

Everyone had turned to look expectantly at America. America plastered on a smile, while internally he was screaming.

"Everyone, this would be my daughter, Angelina Jones, the state of California," he said.

"And I most sincerely and humbly apologize for causing such a disruption," she added. "It was horribly disrespectful of me."

The countries looked at her warily before turning their attention to the two children. Mexico sighed as she realized the time had come when she had to introduce her own states. In all honesty, she had wanted to keep her children far away from the nations because she didn't want them getting caught up in all the international issues that plagued her life. And a few other reasons, too.

"These are Felipe and Teresa," she said. "Baja California and Baja California Sur."

By this point, Spain had somehow managed to manifest himself right beside Mexico without her noticing.

"Mexico, why have you not introduced me to your little nínos before?" He gave a charming smile to the Californias. "Hola, I am your Uncle Spain. It is nice to meet-"

"Conquistador!" Baja California screamed. He grabbed his little sister in his arms and bolted from the room in terror.

"That's why," said Mexico.

At that moment, Romano burst out laughing. It was such a strange occurrence that no one knew how to respond. In fact, poor Veneziano was looking worried at how openly and sincerely his normally angry older brother was laughing. It was somewhat unnerving.

"Well, if this is all settled," said the now-rational California. "We must be leaving. I wasted a whole day of filming and I have a teleconference in an hour. Father, I will see you at the hotel." She paused for a moment. "Felipe left without getting me my notes! And he still never got me that latte I asked for. Such disrespect."
She continued to grumble as she stalked from the room.

"America," said Kenya.

"Yes?"

"You do realize you will be paying for the damages your daughter caused to my conference room?"

"I'll get my checkbook."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I mentioned in the last chapter that California has a few…issues. She can be perfectly sane and reasonable once she takes her meds, but they've been getting less and less effective and she burns through them pretty quickly. The personality differences are meant to reflect the differences between northern and southern California (northern California is fairly sane, southern California is…not).

California, honey, why on earth did you wear designer boots to the desert? The answer: Because she, like, totally needs to look fabulous no matter where she is, brah.

Baja California and Baja California Sur both have two of the best educational systems in Mexico, so I think the personifications would be very intelligent; hence, why Baja California has a college degree when he's physically ten. Baja California, though, is also looking to get (Alta) California to invest in some of his real estate plans, so he accepted a job as her assistant; plus, as he said, his degree is in visual arts (he changed his major halfway through without telling his family) and he needed a job (because, let's be honest, you can't do a whole lot with a visual arts degree).

The native people of Baja California did actually manage to repel permanent Spanish settlement until 1695 when the Jesuits showed up to start missionary work. The Baja Californias were also originally ceded to the U.S. after the Mexican-American War, but the U.S. agreed to give them back because Mexico was concerned about their proximity to Sonora.

Georgia is terrified of fire. During the Civil War, General Sherman burned down Atlanta, the heart of Georgia. Therefore, I think Georgia keeps a fire extinguisher with her most days, just to be safe.

No offence, Kansas. It was the only "flatter than a" joke I could think of that fit. You know how Rhode Island hates short jokes? Well, Kansas hates 'flat' jokes.

California was an independent republic for twenty-five days in 1846 before the American military showed up and said they were going to be part of the US. California became a state in 1850.

California has the largest population of Asian-Americans in the U.S., with Filipino and Chinese being the top two groups, hence why California looks a little bit like China. She used to look more like Mexico, but, as she was still a child when she became a state, her appearance began to change due to immigration patterns, especially because Chinese began immigrating to her en masse at right around the time she actually became a state.
California is the wealthiest state in the U.S. If it became its own country again, it would have the 5th largest economy of any country in the world. However, it also has some serious financial and economic problems, including the fact that it currently makes up one-third of the U.S.'s welfare system and has the highest poverty rate (at 23.5%).

I haven't been able to do a lot of character designing for the Mexican states because I don't know a lot about the stereotypes Mexicans have for other Mexicans (well, there was a lot for people from Mexico City and I did find a few references to how Nuevo León is like the Texas of Mexico, lots of oil tycoons and cowboys; kind of like how Alberta is considered the Texas of Canada for the same reason). If any of my followers in Mexico would be so kind as to let me know what kind of stereotypes exist for the Mexican states, I would greatly appreciate it.

Also, does anyone have any idea what Mexico and her children's surname should be? I know surnames are used differently in Spanish than in English, so if someone could give me some advice, again, I would appreciate it.
It was no secret that South Carolina was something of a problem child.

Even before the Civil War, she wasn't exactly the model of a perfect, little, well-behaved daughter who did what she was told. And, unlike her fellow siblings in the south, she wasn't as good at bottling things up and hiding her anger behind passive-aggressive comments; she was capable of doing it, she just had a tendency to lose control of her anger sometimes. If she wasn't happy about something, she would scream, threaten, throw things, and, on at least one occasion, set fire to Florida's car. Her mind, once made up, was not easily changed.

Which was one of the main reasons why America wanted to keep her away from England. She caused more than enough problems for her father, and America didn't trust that she would remember to keep her promise not to get violent.

Having North Carolina around her only made things worse. The two sisters hated each other, for all the time they spent together, and there were only two things which they could completely agree on. The first was that the Panthers were awesome and it was definitely going to be their year. The second was that they hated it when people thought they were basically the same. They weren't the same! They didn't even look alike. Regardless, North Carolina's presence only tended to make South Carolina more pissed-off than she usually was. And, considering the two sisters spent most of their time together despite their known animus, that meant South Carolina was a veritable ticking time-bomb.

What America didn't know, however, was that the meeting between England and the Carolinas was just around the corner.

Before returning home from the conference in Kenya, America was going to visit England's place for a few days. England had invited him over to his rather stately manor home because he wanted to finally have the chance to get some answers out of his former brother. Canada would be there, too, and France had invited himself along, as well, much to England's chagrin. What none of them realized, however, was that several states and one of Canada's provinces had decided to take a trip of their own to the British Isles.

Both of the Carolinas, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Vermont, and their cousin Nova Scotia had all decided to pay a visit to the lands of their colonizers and maybe find some distant relatives.

As it happened, soon after arriving, the group encountered Northern Ireland. They weren't sure what it was, but he seemed to find something incredibly amusing about the lot of them (except for Vermont, who went largely unnoticed). When his sister the Republic of Ireland got back in, she seemed positively ecstatic about meeting them. The Irish twins gave the group directions to England's house, but asked if they could borrow Nova Scotia for a little trip up north to meet their big brother Scotland (who was taking England's absence as an opportunity to nip up to Ben Nevis for some fresh mountain air and scenery that didn't fill him with rage). Seeing how nervous her cousin was at the thought of going off with people she barely knew, even if they were family and America had said the Irelands were incredibly trustworthy, New Hampshire insisted on accompanying them.
The Carolinas were invited along, too, but said they had some 'business' to attend to before they went anywhere else. Kentucky, therefore, decided he was going to commandeer Vermont for some brotherly bonding time, leading New Hampshire to warn Kentucky that if anything happened to Vermont then she would cut off his 'Appalachians' and shove them up his 'Cumberland Gap.' Vermont, for his part, just tried to bear with it all and occasionally took a swig from his bottle of maple syrup to calm his nerves.

"Are any of the children like moi?" said France eagerly.

"Shut up, you bloody frog," England snapped. "Why would any of America's children be like you?"

"In case you have forgotten, Angleterre, I sold my precious Louisiana Territory to him. Besides, what about Canada's enfants? Surely, quite a number of them must take after me."

America and Canada exchanged looks. All right, maybe they both had kids with a few similarities to their former guardians, but that didn't mean their kids were nothing but England and France clones. Each state, province, and territory was unique and had their own cultures, styles, and even languages. England and France had contributed a lot to how those children turned out, certainly, but the kids were their own people and not just copies of—

They were all jarred from the conversation when they heard the doorbell ring. England got to his feet and grumbled as he went to answer it. Not two seconds after everyone in the sitting room heard the door open, England let out a high-pitched shriek of shock. The others rushed out to see what was wrong and found England frozen in stark disbelief at the two teenage girls standing on his doorstep.

One girl was tall, with long, red hair and eyes of aqua blue behind a pair of rectangular glasses. She was dressed in a pair of old jeans and a baggy sweatshirt with an image of a growling panther on it. The smirk on her face and the faint scent of tobacco put England in mind, to his horror, of Scotland whenever his older brother was up to something.

It was the second girl, however, that caused England to nearly have heart palpitations. She looked like England, himself. Exactly like England, in fact. That is, an England with long hair, a pink dress that would make a Barbie doll green with envy, and no Y-chromosome. Well, she did also have a hint of a tan to her skin, which England had never been able to get because he just tended to turn the shade of a lobster whenever he was in direct sunlight for too long. The girl had an expression of profound annoyance on her face.

"You England, sir?" said the redhead.

England made a choking sound in the back of his throat.

"Kitty, Jessie, what are you guys doing here?" said America.

"Oh, hey, Pa!" the redhead girl continued. "Jess and I was visitin' the neighborhood and wanted to say 'hi' to our kinfolk."

The She-England just crossed her arms and scowled a bit more intensely. England managed to snap out of his stupor and remember his manners.

"Yes, well, do come in," he said.

As the two girls entered the house, the female England stopped in front of America. She then swiftly kicked him in the shin. America let out a hiss of pain and clutchéd at his leg while his daughters just passed into the sitting room. England and France both stared in shock at the utter contempt America's
"Ah, Jessie's a little...temperamental," he said through a wince.

They all returned to the sitting room and sat back down. The room was decidedly tense as America went through the introductions for his daughters.

"Well, England, France, this is Katherine Jones, the state of North Carolina," America said, prompting the redheaded girl to wave brightly at them. "We just call her 'Kitty.' And this is-

"Jessie," said the second girl impatiently. "Jessie Jones. South Carolina."

"That is odd," said France. "I would have thought you would both look more alike."

America tried to wave France off, knowing exactly where he was going, but France didn't notice.

"Oh, why?" said South Carolina, her eyes narrowing sharply as she, too, anticipated what he was going to ask.

"Are you not twins, then?"

"NO!" both girls shouted furiously.

"We ain't twins," said North Carolina, now as angry as her sister. "Why in Sam Hell does everyone think that?"

"And everyone is always thinkin' we're exactly the same," South Carolina added. "I'm nothin' like her. I actually have self-respect."

"The hell you talkin' about?"

"I at least stand by my principles and don't disrespect the folks what gave their lives for me."

"You got somethin' to say, then say it!"

"You know exactly what I'm talkin' about, North. Tear down any more memorials, lately, hippie?"

"Why you-"

"Girls, knock it off," America said. "How many times do we need to go through this?"

"Until everyone north of me sinks into the ocean," said South Carolina. "And maybe Florida, too, for good measure."

"Jessie, for the last time, the Civil War is over."

"Over? I'll never be over until you and those damn Northerners admit what ya'll did wrong."

"Oh, Lawdy," North Carolina muttered, slapping a hand to her forehead in frustration. "Here we go again."

"Wait, I am not certain I understand what is going on," said France. "What is this argument about?"

"Uh, France, you know how I had a civil war back in the eighteen-sixties?" said America.

"Oui, I vaguely recall hearing about it. I received a letter from someone writing on behalf of the 'Confederacy' asking to be recognized and-"
"Wait, you got one, too?" said England in amazement.

"Indeed, mon ami. I was greatly confused by it, but I threw that insulting missive away. No matter how many times my boss told me to respond, I refused."

"As did I. I wasn't going to throw in my lot with people like that. And they had the nerve to cut off trading with me because of it."

South Carolina was turning red and her hands were balled into fists.

"That was because neither of you so-called 'gentlemen' had the decency to write a reply," she said.

"You mean you sent that letter?" England asked. He was looking vaguely horrified.

"Well, Virginia actually wrote the thang while I dictated, but, yes."

"You mean you're the one that led that rebellion against America?"

"Yes, gosh-darnit! What ain't you gettin' about this?!"

England looked at the girl, a girl who could easily have passed for his twin, and then he looked at America. The one who kicked-off a rebellion against the one who had rebelled against England looked like England, himself. Fate must truly have a twisted sense of humor. It was even more disturbing than when he'd met Connecticut.

"I worked so hard to prove a point," she began to rant. "I sacked a fort."

"It was your own fort," America said. "I built it for you for your birthday."

"I issued letters condemnin' an illegal election -"

"Abe Lincoln was the best president since George Washington. You just had trust issues."

"I even made clear my views to my father and he refused to even listen to my complaints!"

"You screamed a bunch of obscenities in my face, claimed that I hated you and only loved your northern siblings, socked me in the gut, and ran away from home!"

"And you tried to get North, here, to invade me because of it!"

"Sometimes," said North Carolina. "I really do wonder if I shoulda done that when Pa asked. Wouldn'a saved us all a lot of trouble down the road."

"Shut up! You were in it just as deep as I was!"

"Perhaps we should change the subject," England said. "Would anyone care for tea?"

The two girls looked at him and their eyes lit up. England wasn't sure whether to be delighted or terrified at the thought that two of America's states actually appeared to be excited at the prospect of drinking tea.

"You mean ya'll Brits really do drink tea all the time?" said South Carolina.

"And here we thought you were just an ol' stiff," said North Carolina. "Me, Jessie, and, well, all us southerners drink tea at breakfast, lunch, and dinner."
"Really?" said England. "I didn't think anyone in America cared much for tea."

"Sho' nuff. Sometimes I think our blood is made of tea we drink so much of it."

"W-well, in that case, I will be right back."

America threw a look over at Canada, who was fighting back an amused grin. The two of them knew what was coming. You see, while both England and the southern states all shared a love for tea, there was a distinct difference in how they drank it. And, as both America and Canada knew about the little quirks of the states, the Carolinas were not likely to take well to England's preferred manner of preparing tea.

England returned quickly with the offered refreshments and began to pour everyone a cup. However, when he handed the drinks to the Carolinas, the two girls were staring at him in horror.

"You're tryin' to poison us!" South Carolina shrieked, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"What?" said England. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"That tea! It's hot!"

"Yes, it is. Is there a problem?"

"Problem?! What kind of lunatic drinks hot tea?!"

"Everyone does."

"Deceiver! I knew we shouldn't've tried to trust you! I came here, sincerely hopin' to mend ol' bridges and whatnot. But you never changed, no matter what Pa said! No, you're tryin' to stab us in the back again!"

"This is ridiculous. I am not trying to poison you. And what do you mean by 'stab you in the back again'? I never did anything to you."

"Oh no? Think back on the American Revolution, then. North and I might not've been born yet, but we got the memories of our people and the land. I'd say that, there, was a cruel betrayal."

"Jessie," America interrupted. He knew she would have a bad reaction to seeing hot tea, but this was a little excessive. Then again, South Carolina could hold a grudge like nobody's business. "As I already told you, England apologized for-"

"I don't care what he's said! He just tried to kill me and you sat there and did nothin'! I hate you all!"

She let out an ear-shattering yell which shook the very earth, itself, and ran from the house. North Carolina was still sitting there, eyeing England with suspicion and occasionally glancing at the still-steaming tea.

"She weren't lyin', you know," said North Carolina. "We really did come here to patch things up."

"What the bloody hell is wrong with her?" England said, completely at a loss.

"Well, she certainly takes after someone, mon ami," said France with a smug smile.

"Just what are you implying, Frog?"

"Oh, nothing. Only that I distinctly recall such tantrums from someone who could never let the
Norman Conquest go."

"That is completely different!"

"Non? Have you forgotten all the times you punched me in the stomach and screamed in my face until you passed out from exhaustion?"

America and Canada stared at England who began to turn red.

"Lawd," said North Carolina. "Jessie really does take after you."

"Maybe someone should go talk to her, eh?" Canada suggested.

"What – who said that?" England said, looking about frantically for the source of the voice.

"I'm right here!" Canada shouted quietly.

"Oh, Canada, when did you get here?"

"I've been here the whole time, eh."

"Who're you?" said Kumajirou from Canada's lap.

"I'm Canada," Canada sighed.

"I'll go find her," said America.

"No," said England. "I'll go. Clearly this is my fault and I want to know why."

"Iggy, Jessie's not exactly the easiest person to talk to."

"Don't call me 'Iggy.' You know I hate that. And I could tell she's a bit difficult."

"Batshit nuts, if you ask me," North Carolina interjected.

"But you clearly aren't much better off with her than I am."

"I'm her father," said America a little defensively. "I've managed this long."

"And a bang-up job you did, there, Pa," North Carolina said dryly.

"Not helping, Kitty."

"Pa, I'm willin' to back you up and all on some things, but, I gotta say, Mr. Poison-Tea, here, has a point."

"The tea wasn't poisoned," England grumbled. "Every sane person drinks it like that."

"Jessie's never gonna get over it if she can't work out her problems, Pa. The reason she still acts like she hates you is 'cause she thinks you hate her and neither of you ever had a proper sit-down about it."

America winced as he realized North Carolina was right. There were a lot of things that he and South Carolina had not really gotten out of their systems after the Civil War and it left a bit of an ugly mark on their relationship. It was made worse by the fact that they both believed they were in the right, as they both had very strong opinions and stubborn streaks a country mile wide. The fact was, though, that America didn't blame South Carolina for what happened; no, the blame for that lay at his
"Fine," he said in resignation. "England, if you want to talk to her, go ahead. But if I hear any gunshots, I'll be out there in a flash, dude."

"Gunshots?" England said in disbelief. "Why on earth would you think I would bring a gun to talk with your daughter?"

"Considering your encounter with Virginia, why did you assume I was talking about you?"

"Oh…right. Fair enough, I suppose."

England seemed slightly more reluctant to go than he had been a few moments earlier. However, he steeled his nerves and walked out the door in search of the infuriated state. America, Canada, France, and North Carolina were left in the sitting room to await his return—or to call an ambulance, as most of them felt would be the result.

"So…" North Carolina said, gingerly picking up a cup of the tea. "Ya'll are sure this ain't poison?"

_________________________

South Carolina had ensconced herself high up in a tree. She was sulking. She honestly had wanted to give England a chance. Despite all the awful memories she'd received as a child, grisly images of war and savage brutality, she didn't hate him. In fact, South Carolina didn't hate anyone, she couldn't, no matter what she had experienced in her life. She didn't even hate her father, even though she often acted like she did; the truth was, she was hurt and sad and afraid. Afraid that her father blamed her for everything that was wrong in the country, just like many of her siblings did.

Even when she was alone, she could hear Louisiana and Arkansas tauntingly calling her the "black sheep" of the south. As if either of them had any right to judge her.

But even with all the taunting and the self-righteousness and all the feelings of anger, South Carolina sincerely did not hate anyone. Her fellow southern states were all experts at hiding their inner resentments and hard feelings beneath a veneer of politeness and false amity, but South Carolina just couldn't do it. Her feelings just exploded out of her and made her say and do things she regretted but couldn't bring herself to admit, or even pretend to admit, were wrong. Everything she'd ever done, she did because she was genuinely trying to protect her people and their rights. However, pride has a way of blinding one to one's own failings and to the suffering of others. But, that didn't stop her from trying to make things right when she did open her eyes, at last.

"South Carolina?" said someone from below and the girl scowled when she recognized that the person was England.

"What do you want?"

"I want to apologize. I have done many things I am not proud of, especially in the times I fought your father, but I wanted to say that I am sincerely sorry for them."

"Do you even understand just how hollow your words seem to me? Do you know why what you did to my people in the Revolution hurt me perhaps far more than anythin' you did to those Northerners?"

"No. I admit that I don't. But I am willing to listen."
"All right, then listen good. The reason why I'm angry is the same reason, I do believe, why I look so much like you. My folks was Loyalists."

Her gaze was sharp as a bayonet's point as she looked at England. South Carolina continued:

"They turned on their own neighbors, their friends and kin, because they wanted to stand by their sovereign. And what did you do? You attacked them! All they wanted was to keep the peace and be left alone, but, oh no, that weren't enough for you. No matter how faithful my people had been, my land became a playground for butchers like that bastard Tarleton. Did you even know what that monster did?"

England flinched a bit. He remembered hearing of the actions of Banastre Tarleton in the Carolinas and had been absolutely horrified by the reports. Slaughters of enemy soldiers who had surrendered, burning of homes, brutal acts of oppression and senseless cruelty…was it any wonder that Loyalist hearts had turned from England when he'd allowed someone like that to run about unchecked?

England had tried to convince himself that they were mere exaggerations and had pushed himself into his own struggle with trying to put down the rebellion and get his wayward brother to come home. But the stories just kept coming until his forces were driven out of the Carolinas, and England had met the man, in question, and the fellow had boasted of everything he'd done, completely unashamed. And the man had then come back to England's shores after the war, touting himself a hero, and tried to undermine England's push towards abolition, frequently mocking all those who stood against the slave trade. It had sickened England to no end.

"I had never intended for things to go so far," England said contritely. "And, believe me, had I known, I would have put a stop to it. I never wanted to harm America, or his people, or you."

"No, you just wanted us all under your thumb," South Carolina snapped. "The sweet, subservient, little underlin' who grins and bears everythin' despite the pain. No wonder Pa acted like he did, if you were his example for child-rearin'."

"What do you mean?"

"When me and my siblings seceded. We had every right to leave when we wasn't bein' represented the way we should've been. But Pa, he just couldn't let us go and our people paid for it. Yes, we were doin' somethin' we ought not to have, but he just overstepped every agreement we ever made with him. He said we could be our own people and make our own choices and then he just took it all away."

England's expression became somewhat solemn.

"I mentioned that I remember the letter you sent me," he said. "And you know I threw it away. Do you know why I did that?"

"It was because you ain't reliable. You wouldn't blow your nose to help one of us."

"No, it was because I couldn't bring myself to help those who practiced a trade I have always despised. It was because I wanted your father to be able to eradicate it from his lands as I did, because he understood how wrong it was. And it was something he had to get his people to understand. If I had stepped in and helped you, if you and your siblings had triumphed...would it ever have ended?"

It was South Carolina's turn to flinch now. She knew exactly what he was referring to. It was one of the few things in her life she willingly admitted she was ashamed of permitting. She had tried throughout her childhood to find ways of justifying it to herself, even when she had known, in her
heart, that it was wrong, and had come so close to fooling herself that she had, at one point, almost believed the lies she'd built to shut out the truth. Of course, someone else had helped spur those thoughts into actions, very shameful actions, but South Carolina knew she couldn't blame anyone but herself for actually committing them.

"Look," England continued, sounding very tired. "We have all made mistakes. I know I certainly have. Your father has made more than his fair share, too. Do you honestly believe that I have learned so little from my life that I would to harm you? Or that your father thinks less of you for turning out more like him than I'm sure even he expected?"

South Carolina looked away from him and crossed her arms over her chest.

"What? You disagree?" said England. "Your argument with your father is almost exactly like how he and I argued right before he had his revolution. A lack of representation and a lack of respect for the grievances you had with him."

"Sh-shut up," South Carolina said, choking back an ugly reaction that might well have been mistaken for a sob. "You don't know anythin' about what happened. The things I did, the people I lost, what I was really fightin' for, none of it. You couldn't possibly understand."

"I understand a lot more than you would expect."

A silence passed between them for a few minutes as the two stared each other down. A strange, wordless conversation was being played out, as England conveyed with his expression alone that he did know exactly what kind of struggle South Carolina had been through. Finally, South Carolina clambered down from the tree and dusted off her dress. She gave England a scrutinizing look.

"Don't expect me to pour my heart out to you," she said. "I ain't the sharin' and carin' type."

"I don't doubt it," said England. There was a slight flicker at the corner of his mouth which one might mistake for the hint of a smile. "And, I really wasn't trying to poison you with the tea. That is just how we drink it here."

"Still don't make no sense to me."

England had to rein in his urge to bemoan the girl's butchering of his language as they both made their way back to the house. As they walked into the sitting room, the others looked them both over for any signs of injury. France groaned and handed twenty euro to Canada.

"I was certain we would be bringing Angleterre to the emergency room," France said. "If we ever found all the pieces."

"Shut up, you bloody wanker," said England.

"Jess, are you okay?" America said to his daughter as she sat back down on the sofa across from him.

"I'm fine, Pa," she said. "When we get back home, there are some things I wanna talk to you about."

America nodded and then plastered on a big, beaming smile. The cheerful moment was disrupted by North Carolina's phone ringing.

"Aw, shucks, forgot to silence it," she said. She accepted the call and held the phone to her ear. "I can't talk right now, I'm in the middle of – what? Kentucky, what's the matter, hon? You're what? Aw, hell. Slow down, darlin', or you'll have one of your fits. Uh-huh. Where's Vermont? What do
you mean you don't know? Oh, New Hampshire is gonna murder you. All right, I'm with Pa. We'll come and get you. Hold tight."

She clicked the phone off and looked up at the expectant faces turned towards her.

"Uh…Kentucky might've gone and gotten into a bit of trouble. Mr. England, sir, I don't suppose you could give us directions to someplace called 'Scotland Yard.'"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: South Carolina's physical resemblance to England is more a matter of irony than a comment on her ancestry. Like North Carolina, much of her white population is actually of Scottish, Irish, or Scotch-Irish descent.

South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union and the Confederate forces in the state marched on Fort Sumter, officially starting the Civil War. Hence, she is something of a problem child for America; however, she does love her father and is proud to be his daughter, she just thinks he hates her because of her role in the Civil War.

People in the American south don't really drink hot tea like in Britain. They drink sweet tea. Tea which has been steeped in water and chilled, then filled with enough sugar to give you diabetes from just a couple sips, and served with ice in the glass. In fact, if you order tea in the south, it's just naturally assumed this is what you mean (unless you're at some fancy café or something). Therefore, I figured that the Carolinas would think England was trying to kill them with hot tea, because the concept is so alien to them.

I think America has a deep trust for the Irelands. It's part of a personal headcanon of mine that, because England was away so much when America and Canada were little, the other British Isles stepped in and doted on the boys. The Irelands, especially, I feel, would have a deep connection with America and America trusts them immensely; Scotland cares about America a lot, too, but just has a stronger bond with Canada. Wales…well, Wales just likes anyone who will talk smack about England with him.

Cumberland Gap is a pass in the Appalachian Mountains at the intersection between Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia.

North Carolina's "memorial toppling" is a reference to a recent incident at the University of North Carolina where students tore down a Confederate monument, known as "Silent Sam," dedicated to the students and faculty who were killed in the Civil War, claiming it was a symbol of white supremacy and institutional racism and that they were taking a stand for social justice. Frankly, I just thought the act was violent, mob-like behavior unbecoming of a responsible and civilized society. But, what do I know?

It always annoys me in State fics when the Carolinas are portrayed as twins. They weren't even admitted to the Union in the same year (South was in 1788, North was in 1789). The Dakotas are twins (the only states admitted on the exact same day of the same year), but the Carolinas are not.

England and France were the two main countries the Confederacy tried to get to recognize the legitimacy of their secession. While many English politicians and
aristocrats sent tacit support to the southerners, as many of them identified with the plantation owners, the English government refused to be seen siding with people who practiced slavery, especially because a vast majority of people in the British Isles, especially among the working classes, were fiercely supportive of the Union (a group of people in Manchester even wrote to Abraham Lincoln, and there is a statue of President Lincoln in Manchester with a plaque containing an excerpt from his response letter to them). In France, Napoleon III wanted to support the Confederacy, despite the disapproval of the French people (who, like the English, hated slavery), because he wanted the United States divided so he could continue his plans to conquer Mexico without the U.S. attempting to intervene.

The Carolinas (and Georgia, too) were initially pretty staunchly Loyalist or, at least, moderate during the beginning of the Revolution; in fact, South Carolina had one of the biggest Loyalist factions. However, when the British army showed up and started pushing the locals around and taking their property and issuing threats and trying to order them into fighting the Patriots, the good ol' boys of the mountains took exception to that behavior and chose to fight the way their heavily Scotch-Irish ancestors taught them. In the Carolinas, there was even a type of battle cry, which allegedly later became the Rebel Yell, that the militiamen used which supposedly derived from a traditional Celtic war cry. South Carolina was also the site of over 200 battles, more than in any other state in the Revolution. If you've ever seen the movie "The Patriot," that film was based on the struggle of the Carolinian militias, particularly that of Francis Marion, and the brutality of the British forces, most notably the atrocities committed by Banastre Tarleton.

Did you know, South Carolina was actually one of the more progressive states in the south during the Civil Rights movement and that its transition out of segregation was one of the smoothest and least violent? I guess SC just got sick of being blamed for the Civil War and just wanted to make things right, even if she is still proudly Confederate.
A Blue Bluegrass

Chapter Notes

What happened in the last chapter? Whenever I go to write up funny, wacky, mad-cap shenanigans, it turns into historical angst. Maybe I've been hitting the history books too hard?
Please don't be shy about reviewing. I'd really like to know what you all think of my fic.
Is there anything you really like? Is there anything I could improve on? Just drop me a line or two in the review box.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He hadn't meant for things to get out of hand. Honest to God, he hadn't.

The fact was, though, that Kentucky was more than a little bit proud of who he was and no one but no one was going to make him change that. He was a legend! A frontiersman who pushed the boundaries and defied the odds. He wrestled with wolves and tamed wild stallions and made some damn fine bourbon and some top-notch baseball bats. He didn't even have a temper like South Carolina, or a god-complex like Texas, or an oily politician vibe like Alabama. So what if he was proud of himself, was it a crime to be successful?

Apparently, some high-and-mighty types have a problem with someone of humble origins achieving any kind of notoriety.

That was surely why he'd been seized from a perfectly acceptable and civilized outing he'd been on with his big brother (although, considering how short Vermont was, could he really be called a 'big' anything?) and thrust into the waiting arms of the Metropolitan Police Force. Some folks just don't have any sense of humor. It was like trying to get Maine to smile…or speak in words of more than one syllable. Really, though, it hadn't been Kentucky’s fault that some hoity-toity dillweed had decided to start something with him.

All right, perhaps he shouldn't have been drinking, especially considering where he had been, but it always got his blood pounding whenever he saw horses racing and he needed a little something to keep him from hollering at the top of his lungs and embarrassing himself, and he actually tended to get calmer when he had a touch of the amber stuff. Or the ultra clear stuff, as the case may be. If his father found out he'd been drinking, especially with his medical condition, Kentucky would really be in for it.

His only hope was that New Hampshire didn't find out he'd lost Vermont. She was just so protective of him. Kentucky still remembered the time she beat New York senseless with nothing but a pie tin after he'd said that Vermont shouldn't even have been a state, considering his land used to be New York's. If she ever caught wind that Kentucky had lost her "pure, precious, and perfect" baby brother, Kentucky wouldn't have so much as an ass to sit on. Which wasn’t fair because he was her baby brother, too! Of course, Northerners all have to stick together when it suits them, don't they?

Regardless, no matter what he had done, Kentucky felt it was completely unwarranted that he should be dragged over to the Scotland Yard headquarters in London, chucked into a cell, and even accused of being a Russian spy or a possible terrorist. Seriously? Kentucky? A spy for the Russians or a terrorist? Of all America's states, it was Kentucky who got a Red Scare pinch-and-nab. If life was
fair, it would be Washington or California in here instead of him.

However, despite the insult to his honor and the threat of potential New Hampshire-delivered maiming hovering over his head, Kentucky still managed to hold on to his dignity.

"Dear God of England, please let me go. If you help me, I will spell 'color' with a 'u.' And I will use the metric system with every cubic milliliter of blood in my – oh, I can't do it. It's so stupid!"

A few moments later, the door to the interrogation room slammed open and two British cops entered. One was a burly, tough-looking man, the kind of guy Kentucky usually challenged to a game of darts or pool after a few rounds in the bar; the kind of guy who looked badass and seemed like he would break your arm if you pissed him off but who probably had a six-year-old daughter at home whom he played princess tea party with when he had time off. The second cop was a short, dignified woman of south Asian extraction, most likely Indian, who seemed calm and benign on the surface but who would definitely kick someone's ass if they got on her bad side.

"All right, mate," the male cop said in a gruff voice. "We can play games all day, if you want, but it'll be easier on all of us if you just admit it."

"Well, I admit I might have overstepped my bounds, somewhat," Kentucky said politely, with an easy smile. "But ain't this all a li'l bit much?"

"Mr…Jones, was it?" said the woman. Kentucky had to fight the urge to roll his eyes, as they already knew his name. "We don't want any more trouble. Just tell us who you are working with."

"Look, Ma'am, I already told ya'll I ain't involved in nothin'. And if ya'll don't believe me, you can answer to my Pa when he and my sisters get here. This was just a misunderstandin'."

"You were seen entering and exiting restricted areas and behaving in a suspicious manner. Bottles of a highly-flammable substance of unknown origin were confiscated from your person. You assaulted an earl."

That just wasn't fair. So what if he was having trouble finding the bathroom when he really needed to take a leak? The restroom wasn't clearly marked and he was trying to be discreet with his little problem. He knew he shouldn't have brought the corn whiskey, but it was one of his best batches and he needed to have a little something to take the load off now and then. And as for that 'assault,' it was in defense of his good name as a man of honor and a gentleman; plus, slapping a blackguard with a glove and challenging him to pistols at dawn could hardly be classified as an 'assault.' Clearly, the Brits had forgotten the ways a man is meant to resolve a quarrel. In other words, shoot until someone is dead or at least wounded in an embarrassing way.

The officers kept grilling him for two hours before a very nervous sergeant entered the room with an order from the higher-ups that 'Sir Arthur Kirkland' was here and was permitted to see the suspect. The two officers were clearly shocked but couldn't do more than nod mutely. Several seconds later, a very dapper man with enormous eyebrows entered the room and looked at Kentucky.

"You'd better let this one go, chaps," he said. "I do believe he's my nephew."

Seeing England standing beside Kentucky was almost a surreal experience. It had been odd enough having England and South Carolina in the same room, but Kentucky was something else entirely. He was a cheerful version of England with normal eyebrows. France just about fainted from shock as he realized how adorable England would be if he just took France's advice and tweezed those caterpillar brows.
America had never understood how it happened. Connecticut, he could kind of see how that worked out. South Carolina, maybe a bit. But Kentucky, that had been a real kicker. Of course, when America thought about just how many people of English descent lived in the Bluegrass State, was it really that strange? And, considering some of his son's other tendencies, like his weird reactions to booze, his usually rather gentlemanly manners, and his occasionally spacey behavior, America probably should have seen the similarities earlier.

"Well, well," said South Carolina rather smugly as Kentucky was brought out of the interrogation room. "Would you look at that? Daddy's little 'good boy' actually got hisself into trouble."

"Aw, heck, Jessie," Kentucky said rather bashfully. "Do you have to rub it in?"

"Yes, I most certainly do. You know how I cherish these moments, Daniel."

"Jessie, be nice to your brother," said America. "He's had a rough day."

"It'll only get worse once Aideen finds out he lost Ethan," said North Carolina. "What happened to him anyway?"

"I don't know!" said Kentucky. "He just plum went and vanished on me."

In truth, Vermont was perfectly safe at a nearby pub. He'd followed the police car when he saw his brother getting hauled off and had decided to simply wait for their father to come and get him. Eventually, he saw the others passing by on their way to the station and had waved his Uncle Canada over to join him in some blissful time away from the wacky hijinks of the family. Because, sometimes, Vermont just needed a break and, as it happened, so did Canada.

"I suggest we leave," said England. "And don't expect me to come to any more sudden rescues if you get into trouble like this, again."

"Aw, shucks, I really do 'preciate the help, sir," said Kentucky. "It really wasn't my fault, you know."

"I'm sure." There was a distinct note of sarcasm in England's tone.

The group chatted as they headed out the door, Kentucky explaining how he had gotten into the little mishap that nearly had him labeled a threat to international security (though he conveniently forgot to mention the corn whiskey, as it obviously wasn't relevant). Apparently, the reason why he'd slapped that earl with a glove and challenged him to a duel was because the man had made some disparaging remarks about American horse racing, calling it 'inferior' and 'low-class,' and Kentucky had taken exception to the insult, considering he hosted the prestigious Kentucky Derby and basically lived and breathed the lifestyle of a master equestrian.

"I couldn't just stand idly by while my honor was impugned," he said. "Impugned, I tells you. So I did what any southern gentleman should and decided to prove a point."

Oddly enough, England and France actually felt sympathetic to the boy. After all, there were times the two of them had done the same thing, albeit in different scenarios. Honor duels were rather a trend throughout European history.

What they were not prepared to deal with, however, was Kentucky trailing off into a rambling story that culminated in him expressing his allegiance issue. Much like how Maryland had divulged her religious conflict over whether she was supposed to be Catholic or Protestant (again, something quite like one of England's internal conflicts which surfaced when he'd had a bit too much to drink), Kentucky had a conundrum of his own.
"I just can't tell," he said. "Am I Union or Confederate?"

"You ain't neither, Daniel," said North Carolina impatiently. She had a splitting headache and was feeling the beginnings of a cold coming on thanks to that damn hurricane, so it didn't help that she had to hear the same old story her brother had been telling for the last hundred and fifty years.

"But I has to be one or t'other!"

"He's like this a lot," South Carolina said to England. "Mostly when he's had drinks he knows he ain't s'posed to have."

Kentucky had, in fact, been taking a few sips from his flask once it was released back to him when they left the police station. Now, it seemed, the effects were starting to kick in.

"You don't know me," Kentucky said, pointing an accusatory finger at his sister. "I'm the great state of Kentucky, that ol' home of Bluegrass, and I can handle anythin' better'n you any day!"

He then hugged South Carolina, much to her annoyance, and started getting a bit weepy.

"I'm so sorry, sis. I just want us all to get along. But I'm so confused."

"Oh, for the love of…" South Carolina muttered. "Delaware, Maryland, and Missouri were all neutrals and they don't do this. Lawd, you're actin' sadder than a cucumber."

"Pa!" Kentucky flung himself against his father. "You love me, don't you, Pa? I'm your favorite son, ain't I?"

"Uh, Danny, you know I don't play favorites, dude," said America, ignoring South Carolina's derisive snort of laughter at that.

"But I was loyal, Pa! I didn't leave, unlike some people." He threw a glare at the Carolinas, who both just quirked a brow at his sudden mood change. "I'm the good one!"

"All right," America said patiently, "sounds like someone needs to lie down for a while."

"To be fair," said North Carolina. "We are all summat jet-lagged."

"I ain't tired!" Kentucky snapped.

America rolled his eyes and hoisted his son over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Come on, little dude," he said. "You've had enough excitement for one day."

Kentucky began sobbing hysterically while his sisters just looked embarrassed and England and France appeared vaguely disturbed. It got even weirder when Kentucky started singing. He wasn't a bad singer, by any means; in fact, he had quite a nice voice; it was just his singing got rather fast-paced and loud and punctuated by wild kicking from his feet as he also tried to clog-dance at the same time. Needless to say, the group drew quite a bit of attention.

Thankfully, Kentucky managed to shake off the depressing effects of his "special tonic," as he called it, by the following day.

Just as the Carolinas had done, Kentucky had not reacted well to being offered hot tea. His response was to duck behind the sofa and issue a warning look to anyone who tried to get him to drink it. He did offer to make dinner that evening, though, as his thanks to England for getting him out of the
little scrape at Scotland Yard and chose to make his prized burgoo recipe. Complete with his favorite
ingredient for the dish.

"Uh, Mr. England, sir, I don't suppose you have any squirrels on the property?"

"Yes, why?"

Kentucky grinned.

"I'll be right back."

"How do you expect to get squirrels without a rifle?" said South Carolina.

"I have my ways."

Kentucky left, and the two European nations stared after him.

"He isn't really going to cook squirrels is he?" said England, who was clearly hoping it was a joke.

"Why wouldn't he?" said North Carolina. "He needs somethin' to make his burgoo."

"You mean you all eat vermin?! America, you feed your children things like that?!"

"Hey, we had to eat something in the wilderness," America said. "The kids just got hooked. Besides,
squirrel's pretty tasty if you cook it right."

"This is as bad as France and his frog legs!"

"There is nothing wrong with eating frog legs," France said waspishly.

"Hey, I eat frog legs, too," said South Carolina.

England turned a furious glare on France and stood before him with a dark aura.

"You," he growled at his old rival. "You corrupted my colonies, didn't you?"

"Well, at least they don't eat those lumps of coal you call 'scones,' rosbif," said France.

England began to throttle France for 'tainting his former colonies' sense of taste.' America and the
Carolinas just watched the show (as did Vermont and Canada, who had also returned safely but had
both faded into the background once they got back) and only looked away when they saw Kentucky
walk in carrying a burlap sack and smiling triumphantly. Kentucky walked into the kitchen,
unnoticed by England and France who were still too busy fighting to realize he had returned.

Kentucky noticed the faint scorch-marks on parts of the kitchen and rolled his eyes as he figured it
was likely the result of one of Montana's gift packages; her work always had a certain quality about it
that he could recognize. After he'd cleaned his catch and set about preparing the pot for the burgoo,
he thought he heard giggling coming from one of the cupboards. Kentucky watched for a moment as
one of the cupboard doors twitched open a hair, as though someone was peeking out from inside it.
The boy gave a friendly smile.

"Hey, there," he said. "My name's 'Daniel,' what's yours?"

England and France were noticeably wary when Kentucky announced that dinner was ready.
England had tried to insist that, as the host, he 'couldn't possibly' allow a guest to cook for him.
France needed no explanation; as a gourmet, he had some reservations about food prepared by someone so...rustic. Especially someone who looked so much like England. Needless to say, the two nations awaited dinner that evening with considerable trepidation.

Kentucky entered the dining room, carrying a large stewpot and laughing.

"Oh, Mr. England, sir," he said. "You didn't tell me you had such funny housemates."

"Housemates?" England said.

"Yeah, they's a real riot. And, believe you me, sir, I know riots."

England was confused now. The only housemates he had were his brothers, who had all sent him very vulgar and slightly threatening texts to let him know they would be out for most of the week. Which meant the only other people in the house besides England, France, the Americans, and...that guy who wasn't America...would be England's fae friends. England's eyes went wide.

"America," England said in a low voice when Kentucky went back into the kitchen to get the cornbread, "by any chance, does Kentucky happen to have...magic?"

"What?" said America. "No way. Only three of my kids mess around with that crazy stuff. Rhode Island, Louisiana, and Washington."

"Nitty as peanut brittle, they are," said South Carolina. "Danny doesn't talk to folks what ain't there like those three. He has some common sense. Not much, but enough."

Inside the kitchen, Kentucky shared a laugh with Flying Mint Bunny and a couple fairies.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Kentucky has the highest reporting of exclusively English ancestry for any state in the U.S. Almost half of the state's entire population have listed themselves as being of English descent. Many of them probably have Scottish and/or Irish, too, but simply don't know it or don't acknowledge it.

Kentucky was a neutral border state during the Civil War. It was also the birthplace of both Abraham Lincoln (President of the U.S.) and Jefferson Davis (President of the Confederacy). So, I think dear old Kentucky has some issues with identity like his sister Maryland; only, instead of Catholic vs. Protestant, he's not sure whether he's supposed to be Union or Confederate.

The metric system joke is from "The Simpsons" in the episode "The Regina Monologues." I actually kind of like the metric system, probably because I learned it before learning the imperial system (I attended a British-run school for most of my early education and switched to an American school in 7th grade), and I think we might just be better off using it. Celsius, on the other hand, makes no sense at all for daily use; Fahrenheit will always be better (all you need to know in Fahrenheit is that a high number is really freaking hot and a low number is really freaking cold).

'Corn whiskey' is the technical name for moonshine.

"Sadder than a cucumber" is some weird southern saying that just means really sad. I
don't know why cucumbers would be sad, but that's just the saying.

Clogging is the state dance of Kentucky. It derives from traditional dances from the British Isles, Africa, and the Native American tribes.

Burgoo is meat and vegetable stew from Kentucky which is made out of basically whatever you can get. Frogs are also eaten in quite a few places in the south. Sorry, England, but I guess your colonies did take after France a little bit. Actually, archaeological evidence suggests that Brits ate frog legs long before the French did, so England really isn't in any position to throw stones at France for eating frogs.

I think Kentucky has magical abilities, but he doesn't talk about them much with his family because he doesn't want to be labeled as one of the family "oddballs." The reason for Kentucky's powers is because he was the birthplace of the famous psychic Edgar Cayce. And, perhaps, a few too many swigs of the corn whiskey.
Scotland was a country of few words. Well, more than a few words whenever he was around his little brother, England. In fact, in those instances, he had quite a number of choice things to say.

Most days, however, he tried to keep himself to himself. Though the occasional bid for independence would jostle him out of the monotony of everyday life. He did wish he was allowed to attend U.N. meetings, though, instead of being made to stay behind by England. Not that Scotland couldn't get in if he really tried to (if Prussia could do it, then Scotland could damn well do it and actually be useful rather than act like a showoffy arse). And all the news of the recent incidents involving America's children had given Scotland, as well as Wales and Northern Ireland, quite a good laugh. The Republic of Ireland had kept the lot of them up-to-date on the antics, though nothing would ever top those three New England states attempting to relive the Boston Tea Party.

It was a secret Scotland would carry to the grave, but he might have, possibly, ever-so-slightly, encouraged America's rebellious side when the boy was younger. England wasn't around that often for America and Canada, so the other British Isles siblings had a tendency to step in from time to time. Actually, they probably did more to raise the boys than England, himself, did. So, was it any wonder that America had picked up on the love for freedom and independence when his main source of emotional support as a child was from a bunch of rowdy, pissed-off, and slightly bitter countries who had been fighting to get their brother off their backs for centuries?

Frankly, Scotland thought it was a wonder that Canada hadn't gone into full-scale revolution, too. Although, there was that one time…

Scotland was disturbed from his musings by the sight of the Irelands hiking over towards him. He'd been sitting out on his favorite spot at his beloved Ben Nevis, breathing in the fresh mountain air and being able to smoke his cigarettes without England getting on his case.

"Allistor!" the Republic of Ireland called out cheerfully. "T'ere's some folks we want ya to meet!"

Scotland glanced behind his siblings and noticed that, yes, there were two others with them. A pair of teenage girls, from the look of it. They were both tall, slim, and fair, with long curls of deep red hair. One girl had blue eyes, freckles, and an impassive expression; the other had eyes of forest green, somewhat thick eyebrows, and the lower half of her face buried in a blue and white scarf.

"Ugh, slow down, Erin," Northern Ireland grumbled as he caught up with her.

"Can't," his sister chirped back at him. "I'm just excited, is all. Allistor, I want ya to meet some nieces o'ours." She turned to the girls with a bright smile. "Go on, now, m'dears."

"Well, good day, I suppose," said the solemn girl. "I'm N'Hampshah. Aideen Jones. It's a, uh, pleasah to make your acquaintance." She didn't sound as though it was a pleasure. Her slow, drawn-out manner of speaking made it seem as though she either had no direct opinion or that she was simply trying to politely indicate she didn't like him or anyone else present.

Scotland noticed that the girl, New Hampshire, was wearing a shirt that read: Live Free or Die. She was also wearing a tartan skirt (not a kilt, because kilts are a very specific – and very manly – form of attire) in a pattern of purple, green, red, and a tiny bit of white and black.
"In't t'at a lovely name, Allistor?" said the Republic of Ireland. She then turned to the girl with the scarf. "And you, love?"

The other girl muttered something into her scarf and tried to hide her face deeper into it.

"She's a little shy," said New Hampshire. "And she's wohried you might make fun of hah accent."

There was more muttering from the other girl.

"Novahr, don't be like that. I don't think theah going to tease you. Just tell them yoah name."

The girl slowly pulled the scarf down, revealing more of her very pale skin.

"C-Coira W-Williams," the girl stammered. "N-Nova Scotia."

Scotland blinked at the girl in amazement while the Irelands just grinned knowingly. Scotland might not have said anything – well, nothing while he was sober – but his mischievous younger siblings both knew how badly he'd wanted to see his little former colony. Nova Scotia, for her part, just seemed really embarrassed.

"Yer Nova Scotia?" Scotland repeated.

"A-Aye – I'mean, uh, y-yes," she said.

Scotland gave her a kind smile that had the young girl blushing to the roots of her red hair.

"No need to worry, lass," he said. "I've been waitin' a long time to meet ye."

"Mmph." She'd burrowed her face into her scarf once again.

"As I said," said New Hampshire. "She believes hah accent is somewhat embahrassing. Novahr, I told you it is not so bad. Bettah than having to listen to New Yahk, anyway."

Nova Scotia snickered a little at that.

"Well, my dear lassies," said Scotland with a charming smirk. "How's about ye let yer old Uncle Scotland treat ye to a grand time? I promise, I'm a lot more fun than that stingy toff England."


When Kentucky and the Carolinas revealed that New Hampshire and Nova Scotia were up north meeting their Uncle Scotland, England just about had a panic-attack. The last thing he needed was for his brother to encourage further hostile sentiment towards England among his former colonies.

America had tried to assure England that the worst that could happen would be that New Hampshire would decide to try making haggis just to prove she could. When North Carolina had interjected that she'd always been kind of curious about what haggis tasted like, England had screamed that "it" was spreading and that it was only a matter of time before a horde of bagpipe-playing, kilt-wearing maniacs with claymores appeared at the border screaming "FREEDOM!" That was why England made them drive non-stop, even as mutinous grumbling came from the back of the car.

Of course, things became more difficult when they realized they had no idea where they were supposed to be going.

"I could find them," said a soft voice.
"You mean we don't even know where they are?!!" England screamed, not having heard the voice.

"Dude, what are you getting mad at me for?" said America. "You're the one who wacked-out on us and drove like a lunatic to get here."

"I could find them," the soft voice repeated.

"Don't try to turn this around on me, you git," said England. "I'm trying to keep from having another damned revolution on my hands. Show a little bloody sympathy."

"You're overreacting, Iggy," said America. "It's not like New Hampshire's going to do anything too crazy or violent. She's pretty responsible."

"Well, Pa, she does love guns," said North Carolina.

"So do we, you idgit," said South Carolina.

"Yeah, but Aideen hides guns on her in places I ain't ever known a body to hide guns."

"If she takes after Amérique, then we should be able to find them from the sounds of the gunshots and the trail of hamburger wrappers," said France.

"I could find them," the soft voice said more insistently.

Still, no one seemed to hear him. Canada gave a resigned sigh and rested a hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"Just give up, kid," said Canada. "They'll never notice us. Best to get used to it, eh."

But the boy simply frowned and took in a large breath of air.

"HEY!"

Everyone turned and blinked in surprise at the yell from the heretofore-unnoticed member of the group. His golden-blonde hair fell down past his shoulders and had a little half-curl that refused to be tucked. His eyes were a bright green and, while normally kind, were currently narrowed in annoyance. Over a lavender-colored t-shirt with a peace sign symbol, he was wearing an old, weather-beaten leather jacket with various patches sewn on it, including a little rectangle with a rainbow pattern.

"Woodchuck!" Kentucky exclaimed, pulling the unamused boy into a hug. "I was worried sick about you. When did you get here?"

"I've been with you the whole time, you Fla'lander!"

England and France were staring as though they couldn't quite comprehend what it was they were seeing. How had they not noticed someone else in the group? Especially someone so…uniquely-attired. There was something odd about the boy, as if it were causing their brains to slowly fry just trying to figure out who he was and how he existed.

"Hey, Ethan," said America. "Why didn't you speak up earlier, kiddo?"

"I did! You all were ignoring me!"

"What? No way. I'd never ignore you." America then turned to see England and France still staring. "Oh, dudes, I guess I forgot to introduce you to my son, Ethan."
"Uh, what state are you, then?" said England, still fighting the confusion engulfing him.

"I'm Vermon'," the boy answered.

"Who?"

"Vermon'!"

"I'm sorry, I don't-"

"Oh, really, Angleterre," said France with a huff. "The dear boy obviously just said his name is 'Green Mountain.' Pay attention."

"Right, sorry."

Vermont sighed in frustration. That was as close enough, he supposed; technically correct from a literal translation standpoint, anyway. Still, it was better than Connecticut mistaking him for his assistant and ordering Vermont to bring him coffee or throw things at office workers Connecticut was angry with or write down Connecticut's plans for world domination.

"As I was trying to say," Vermont continued. "I know how to find them."

"How do you propose to do that?" said England.

Vermont reached into one of his coat pockets and pulled out his phone.

"Aideen pu' a trackah in my phone to make sure she can find me," he explained. He also ignored the disbelieving stares because, while, yes, it was incredibly weird that his sister was so determined to keep tabs on him, he had gotten used to it well over two hundred years ago. "Of course, if she can use her phone to find me, I can reverse i' back to her."

"Since when are you a techy, Ethan?" said North Carolina.

"I'm no', but Californiar showed me how. No' tha' hard, really."

"You got help from Crazy Cali?" said South Carolina, a note of distaste coloring her tone.

"She may be insane, bu' she knows cellphones." Vermont fiddled with his cellphone for a few minutes before giving a triumphant smirk. "Go' them."

They found Scotland, the Irelands, Nova Scotia, and New Hampshire attending a Highland Games contest which Scotland had managed to set up in a matter of hours after he'd learned his nieces were fond of friendly contests.

The countries simply stared in shock as the two redheaded teenage girls competed ruthlessly against each other. New Hampshire, despite her unreadable face, had a determined glint in her eyes as she faced off against sweet, little Nova Scotia, who seemed to be radiating an almost maniacal aura. The spectators were awed by the sight of the two very petite and slender girls throwing weights and tossing hammers and other very athletically strenuous activities.

America and Canada both smiled fondly at their respective daughters. The two girls were the best of friends, but they were both little, tiny bit on the competitive side.

"Oh, look, it's the caber toss," North Carolina said excitedly.
"Wait, how do you know about the Highland Games?" said England.

"Pfft, I have at least four major ones at my place, sir. South and Kentucky have a couple, too."

"Monty, here, ain't got any," said Kentucky, slinging an arm around Vermont's shoulders, much to his annoyance. "He usually goes to New Hampshire's."

"Don' call me 'Mon'y,'" Vermont grumbled under his breath. "I ha'e tha'."

They all watched as the two girls stood, glaring at each other in a friendly sort of way, in amongst a group of buff, rugged Scotsmen who were making wagers on which of the two girls was going to win. Scotland, himself, was actually looking slightly teary-eyed at the spectacle. In fact, Scotland seemed so happy that he didn't even bother to glare or throw an insulting barb when England led the others over to him.

"What are you so bloody smilie about?" England snapped.

"They're a pair of little angels, aren't they, Artie?" Scotland replied.

"Ah, the fam's all t'gether," said Northern Ireland as he and the Republic of Ireland took note of America, Canada, and the states. "Alfred, Mathew, me boyos, you certainly did a foine job o' raising them children o' yers."

As America and Canada thanked him, the caber toss started up. While the states were silently cheering on their sister, even though a couple of them weren't overly-fond of New Hampshire, they already suspected that even she wouldn't be able to win against Nova Scotia in that particular contest. Their suspicion was proved correct when Nova Scotia kept tossing the heavy, wooden logs like they were no more than twigs. New Hampshire might have been an American state and, like her father, had rather unnatural levels of strength, but Nova Scotia was in a league practically all her own.

Nova Scotia won.

New Hampshire's expression didn't waver, but she did exude waves of anger that were not lost on her family.

"Noo hard feelin's, coz?" said Nova Scotia, offering her hand.

New Hampshire hesitated for a moment before shaking it firmly, though her eyes practically screamed "I'll get you next time." Nova Scotia just smiled sweetly, as if silently daring her cousin to try.

When the two girls joined the little family gathering, Vermont handed the 'obviously-not-sulking' New Hampshire a little tub of Ben and Jerry's ice cream to cheer her up (though how he had managed to keep ice cream hidden on his person without it melting was a secret known only to Vermonters). Canada gently and politely praised his daughter for her victory, causing her to blush and mumble something about it 'not being a big deal.'

When Scotland started suggesting they all have dinner, though he only grudgingly extended the invitation to England, France suddenly announced that he had to leave, right then, and get back to his home because some 'urgent business' had come up. Of course, Vermont, New, Hampshire, and the Carolinas all had at least some understanding of French and, from the mutterings in his native tongue which they overheard, deciphered what he said as being comments about getting back to where he wasn't threatened with potential food poisoning. It seemed that France didn't have any better of an opinion on Scotland's cooking than he did of England's.
"Well, if we'ah gonna eat, let's get going," said New Hampshire.

"Aye, I'm right ti-erd as fuck." Nova Scotia slapped a hand to her mouth and blushed again.

Scotland looked, if possible, even prouder.

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Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Title is a sort of reference to one of my favorite songs I heard as a kid. The actual lyrics are "You'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road, and I'll be in Scotland before you. But me and my true love will never meet again, on the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond." It really should be sung in Scottish form, but I only ever heard the anglicized rendition as a child. My parents were really big into old, traditional songs and folk melodies back then and I grew up with a weirdly old-fashioned taste in music.

Bet you all didn't know that Canada attempted a revolution. Well, it was more like a series of rebellions in 1837 by reformers who didn't like the British colonial government. But still.

For those who don't know, Ben Nevis is a mountain in Scotland, the highest one in the entire U.K.

New Hampshire's state motto is 'Live Free or Die.' And they are quite proud of it.

The general stereotype associated with New Hampshire – and most of the New England states, really (especially more mountainous/rural areas) – is that the people don't like outsiders. They just want you to buy their booze and get the hell out. It's sort of a general stereotype associated with people who live in more inaccessible regions, like the mountains, that they are closed off from society and just don't like interacting with people they've never met before. Of course, once they do get to know a person, you couldn't find anyone friendlier or more hospitable. The view they have of people in the south, with the 'southern hospitality,' who act friendly to everyone is that they aren't sincere because they are only welcoming because it is expected of them or else that they have ulterior motives for being so friendly.

New Hampshire's largest ancestry group is Irish; however, due to census mix-ups in American history, many of the people who list their ancestors as one thing are often something else. Usually this happens in confusing English ancestry with another group from the British Isles. So, I think New Hampshire may have more Scottish, or at least Scotch-Irish, blood than even she knows about. Plus, New Hampshire does host its own Highland Games (quite a number of states have Highland Games, as do many places in Canada), so there are probably more than a few Scots there and I've seen pictures of New Hampshire policemen in kilts in the state tartan.

Also, please note, I love New Hampshire's tartan.

Nova Scotia would obviously win the caber toss. Nova Scotia is where Danny Frame set the record for most caber tosses in three minutes at the Heart of the Valley Festival just this year (July 2018).

Nova Scotia's a little shy about her accent because many of her siblings tease her for it. Also, from what I found from my research, it seems that "as fuck" is often thrown around rather casually in conversation in Nova Scotia.
People in Vermont and, I think, New Hampshire call people from out of state "Flatlanders." Hey, if you live on a mountain, most everywhere else is flat. Not sure if Kentucky should count as "Flatland," though, because it's pretty mountainous, too.

"Vermont" is French for "green mountain." Vermont was settled by both English and French, and there is still a substantial portion of the population that is of French descent. Vermonters, from what I've read, usually drop the 't' from the ends of words. Please correct me if that's wrong.

Vermont may be a bit like his Uncle Canada, but he's still America's son and can get attention when he really needs to…by shouting until people take notice. There are two stereotypes associated with Vermonters. One is that they're a bunch of slow-talking farmers who love their cows. The second is that they're a bunch of tree-hugging hippies.
You'll Always Come Home

Chapter Notes

There might be a tiny bit of political reference in this. Not meant to offend and I hope I stayed at least fairly moderate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As much fun as it had been for the states to visit the British Isles, what with the Highland Games, getting arrested on suspicion of international espionage, getting advice on effective rigging of explosives from Northern Ireland, South Carolina having screaming matches with anyone who looked at her cock-eyed, Nova Scotia using some very potent swears whenever someone managed to coax her into speaking, and New Hampshire nearly pushing Kentucky off the ramparts of the castles they toured to punish him for – however briefly – losing Vermont, it was time for the Americans and the Canadians to get back home.

North Carolina decided that the best way to get back was for her to 'acquire' an airplane and fly them there, herself. So, on the day that they were all to leave, the group (accompanied by England and his siblings) met out on the airport tarmac as North Carolina rolled in, driving the little private jet like it was no more difficult than a car. When she pulled to a stop, she flung the hatch door open and beamed.

"Well, hop on in, ya'll," she said.

"America," said England, grabbing the other nation by the sleeve and looking worried, "you cannot possibly expect me to believe that you are going to allow a child to fly an aircraft."

"Huh? Of course Kitty's going to fly us," America said in confusion. "She has her license."

"I'm where flyin' was invented, sir," North Carolina said proudly.

"I think Ohio would argue with you on that, darlin'," said Kentucky.

North Carolina's smile became somewhat condescending.

"He can say he's 'First in Flight' all he wants, but it don't make it true," she said. "'Sides, li'l Ohio's always so cute when he's bein' insecure. Anyway, 'nuff of the gum-flappin'. Let's get this show on the road, ya'll."

England still looked deeply concerned. Not that he cared about America's safety or anything, he tried to tell himself. It was just that he didn't like the thought of all the trouble America and his children might cause for other aircraft they encountered. Chances were that they would cut someone off on the runway, or try shooting fireworks out of the engines, or start doing stunt-flying in the middle of a flight path.

Still, it turned out that North Carolina had at least some idea of what she was doing, as the plane didn't crash into anyone or anything as it took off into the skies. England watched it go with a strange feeling he couldn't quite name. As much trouble as those states had seemed, at first, it had actually been…rather nice getting to meet them without receiving threats of grievous bodily harm.
In a strange and uncharacteristic show of familial affection, Scotland rested a hand on England's shoulder.

"They're some darlin' wee bairns, aren't they, Artie?" he said.

"I suppose," said England.

"I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Hmph, not that I care, but I'm sure you're correct."

"Pity poor South Carolin' got cursed with yer face, though. Can't think of anythin' more heartbreakin' fer a lass."

The Irelands just stood there laughing as England began yelling furiously at Scotland, who simply smiled in response.

North Carolina had to take a detour down south before flying the others to their respective destinations because New Hampshire wanted to shove Kentucky out of the airplane and it was only polite to do so while over his place.

As Kentucky made his descent, everyone in the plane could practically hear him shouting in outrage that his parachute turned out to be pink. Vermont seemed unusually smug about something, after that.

Eventually, however, everyone was returned safe and sound to their homes. Once she'd delivered the last of her passengers, North Carolina saluted her father from behind the cockpit window and shot off into the wild blue yonder once more. Where she went and what she did next would remain something of a mystery, though the fact that Washington called America several days later to whine that someone had spray-painted "GO PANTHERS!" all over the headquarters of the Seattle Seahawks gave painted a fairly clear picture of what happened.

Regardless, America got back to the house in D.C. in one piece.

Only to find a pile of paperwork waiting for him.

"And I thought my new boss was going to cut me at least a little slack," said America. He gave a resigned sigh and tried to remember where he'd put those carpal tunnel braces Connecticut had given him. "Guess the hero's work is never done."

Ten minutes later, America was getting very close to banging his head on the table. His latest boss had assured him that they were going to start cutting the red tape that made things so needlessly complicated and difficult. Unfortunately, in order to do that, they had to get through that same red tape so they could get the process going. Additionally, his boss's opposition was doing everything they could to undermine everything his boss was working on out of spite more than anything else. Sure, his boss wasn't the most likeable of people and had more than a few issues (and, really, had America ever had a boss without any kind of flaws before?), but he really was doing a lot of good, all things considered, even with the opposition ruthlessly hounding him and anyone associated with him. It was almost like they wanted his boss to fail and the country to be plunged into anarchy and discord. Things which America had already had more than enough of in his history.

"DADDY!"

Speaking of anarchy and discord, it sounded as though California had come back and her medication
had worn off again.

His little Golden Girl slammed open his office door and physically lifted America out of his chair as she hugged him and sobbed. She was one of only three states strong enough to do so. Of those three, California was the strongest; if she wished, she could become her own country as she had once intended, but, no matter what happened or how fiercely she seemed to oppose what America and most of the other states were doing, she never tried.

"Daddy, the voices won't stop!" she screamed.

Her embrace was beginning to become rather painful and America was, though he would never admit it, actually starting to have difficulty breathing.

He honestly hated it when California got like this. Not because it was irritating, but because he knew she really was in a lot of pain. While she'd always had a rather unique personality, her mind had started fracturing in the twentieth century, due largely to the effects of Hollywood. America loved his film industry and many of the amazing works that had come out of it in the past, but the things that it did to the people involved were heartbreaking and, by extension, had led to his daughter developing problems of her own that were not dissimilar to what many people involved in entertainment went through. The late sixties and early seventies had been what really caused the problem to spiral out of control and it terrified America that there was so little he could do to help his daughter as she kept on that descent.

These days, the only way to get California back to a semblance of her old self was with medications. Even then, the other side of her wasn't entirely what she used to be.

Another one of his daughters had a similar problem, but it wasn't quite like this. Frankly, considering how many divisions within the states there were, it was nothing short of a miracle that so few of America's children had personality disorders.

"AHHH -ugh!"

California slumped against him, completely out cold. America looked over at the doorway and saw his little grey housemate Tony standing there with one of his alien phaser gun devices.

"Thanks, Tony," he said.

"Fucking shit," the rather foul-mouthed extra-terrestrial replied.

"Yeah, she's had another episode."

"Bitch shit fuck."

"I know, dude." America picked California up and started carrying her up to one of the bedrooms to sleep off her little fit. "I think it's getting worse."

"Shit fucking hell."

"No, I'm not just going to lock her up. I'm sure she'll get better if I just give her some time. It's bad enough that we have to keep her on the meds, but I am not putting any of my kids in a mental institution."

America gently set California down on a bed and tucked her in. He checked his cellphone and saw that Georgia had sent him a text warning him about California's disappearance; he sent her a message back to reassure her that her sister was fine. Well, as fine as California could be under the
"Better make a store run," America said. "When California wakes up, she'll probably want some of that special vegan ice cream she likes."

"Ass fuck shit."

"Sure, I'll pick up some Cheetos, too."

When he finally got to throw himself into his own bed late that evening (although, technically, it was the morning of the following day), America was absolutely wrecked. Not only had he had to comfort California when she woke up, but many of his other children had called him up to voice concerns about their own problems. Quite a number were up in arms over the most major recent scandal in the political sphere and the appalling way in which it was being handled. They all had an opinion on the issue and America had to simply smile and patiently listen to each one.

America loved his kids. No matter how many times they drove him nuts, they were still his children and he would do everything he could to help them.

It was difficult to help people who didn't necessarily want to be helped, though. It was what made being a hero such a challenge. And America really did want to be a hero. He wanted to do what was right no matter what other people said and to teach his children to be kind and compassionate to others. It was why America so relentlessly defended those he cared about, even when they didn't ask for his support or when it caused people to turn on him. It was why he stood by countries like Israel and Kosovo, even when other nations hated them or refused to acknowledge them. It was why, no matter what his children did, he would never turn them away or stop loving them.

But it was tough, sometimes. Being a single parent was stressful and he truly missed the days when he had someone he could depend on there to back him up. To give America the same kind of support he gave to others.

That time had passed, though, and the person he'd once trusted to stick with him through everything was gone. It had been a sobering lesson America had needed to learn. The tighter you tried to cling to someone, the more they drifted away from you. America had been blind to the problems he was making for himself, wounds that had been allowed to fester because he was so focused on keeping everyone together he couldn't see the real dangers that were right before his eyes.

It was why, these days, he did what he could to give his children as much free rein as possible. He couldn't bear to lose them as he nearly had so long ago.

They had all come home, in the end. And, as far as he had seen, they always would. The unity of their family had been preserved and remained intact. But, sometimes, when he faded off into the fitful rest of a man weighed down by the exhaustion of his responsibilities and the issues plaguing his people and his family, America wondered if the price of ensuring that unity had been too high and whether or not it was strong enough to last.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Whatever else you can say about the current U.S. administration, bear in mind that it is what we have right now and if the president fails to do his job then we are
all screwed. Instead of tearing him down and raving like lunatics, how about we try being rational and look at what is happening objectively and maybe try to get all the facts before rushing to set the country on fire…and I've probably just lost half of my readers.

I'm sure some of my readers can tell what the "recent scandal" is that the states are all worked up about. All I have to say on the issue is this: Every person, no matter what, is innocent until proven guilty – no exceptions – and that if we allow ourselves to be ruled by mob-mentality and the words of demagogues, we have lost the ability to function as a fair and just society.

I will add one more thing. George Washington was right. Political parties suck.

Kitty Hawk, North Carolina was where the Wright brothers made the first sustained flight in an aircraft (in case you couldn't tell, NC's human name Katherine "Kitty" is meant to be a reference to "Kitty Hawk"). The Wright brothers were originally from Ohio, which is why Ohioans claim that their state is really "First in Flight" despite the fact that the flight was in North Carolina.

The Carolina Panthers have developed a rivalry in recent years with the Seattle Seahawks (they also have longstanding rivalries with the Atlanta Falcons, the New Orleans Saints, and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers).

America has gotten into trouble with many other countries for supporting Israel. America has also been supportive of Kosovo, and was one of the first to recognize Kosovo's independence, even though it has put us at-odds with Serbia and Russia.

Sorry for the angst at the end, but we all know the nations are far more complex than they seem. America, especially, despite all his youth and energy and eccentricity, has some deep emotional turmoil.

Oh, I also have plans to include micronations in a future chapter or two. I actually found out that my parents and some of their friends had started a micronation back in the eighties. Apparently, they named their pet cat the prince and my mother was serving as the regent. They had their own flag and motto and they even launched an invasion of a park that was located near the group house where they had all been living at the time. After talking with my parents about it, we've decided to invite their old friends from that group back for a reunion and so I'm going to be involved in restarting a micronation! All we need is a new cat to be crowned prince or princess seeing as the old one has long since passed away. Farewell, Prince Buster, I hardly knew ye!
A Meeting of Awesome

Chapter Notes

We all knew it was bound to happen.
Also, I’ve started uploading sketches of my state OCs onto my DeviantArt account, if anyone’s interested (my account name is Redbayly).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ordinarily, Pennsylvania was a calm and reserved state.

She didn’t like to get into conflict if she didn’t have to and preferred to keep the peace as well as could be expected in such a crazy, messed up, and unstable family. She could be very stern and serious; however, she tried to temper it with politeness and a sympathetic, but still firm, resolve. She wasn’t ashamed of it, of course. As the second eldest state, it was her duty to be responsible and watch out for her younger siblings and protect them from dangerous outside influences.

There were other times, though, when she fell prey to the Great Tempter.

No, it wasn’t Satan. She could deal with Satan. She’d had to before when Rhode Island messed up an incantation. The little idiot just never learned his lesson about the dangers of messing with magic.

The Great Tempter was the evil force that led her astray. Her chief weakness which awakened within her that side of her personality. Not that she wasn’t grateful for "Sylvia," what she called that version of herself, as she’d needed her help in order to cope with a considerable amount of pressure and stress and no small amount of mental trauma. It was just that "Sylvia" had a tendency to take over and it became a dreadful struggle to regain control of herself; and, by the time she did wrest back control, the damage that "Sylvia" unleashed would already have been done. That was why Pennsylvania had to keep constantly vigilant in case the Great Tempter crossed her path.

At least her third personality, "Penelope," was more dignified and well-behaved, albeit a bit stuffy and pretentious. And she only really came out whenever Pennsylvania got particularly annoyed, or else when she, Massachusetts, and Vermont had one of their recitals as they all shared a love for Classical music.

Regardless, as long as she stayed far away from the Great Tempter, Pennsylvania was a perfectly level-headed and respectful young lady who embodied the true American spirit and the hard struggle for freedom and equality. After all, she had Philadelphia, the place where freedom was born.

Her soft smile became more of a smirk as she thought about all the truly…well, awesome things that she represented.

It was another world conference meeting. And it was Germany's turn to host. Naturally, Prussia decided to invite himself to the meeting, as well. This wouldn’t normally be a problem for America; after all, Prussia was the founder of the Awesome Trio, of which America was proudly a member along with Denmark. However, the circumstances were not exactly ideal.

The fact was, Pennsylvania had asked to come along with America. She had wanted to see some
museums and things and reconnect with parts of her Germanic heritage now that they states had more free rein and there wasn't a war raging in Europe. America had agreed without taking into account one glaring danger to having Pennsylvania roaming loose in a country that was known for its love of the thing that tempted Pennsylvania into becoming that version of herself. When it dawned on America just what he might have unleashed on the unsuspecting people of Berlin, he was already seated at the meeting and trying to find his notes.

Everyone was still getting seated while America was frantically looking through his briefcase for his notes and trying to ignore the worry he was feeling for his daughter being all on her own.

"Um, I beg your pardon," said a soft, feminine voice from the doorway. "I hope I'm not intruding."

The nations quieted rather quickly as they took in the sight of the tall, pretty girl standing there. She had light blonde hair that was pulled up into a sensible bun, though a pair of long strands framed either side of her face. Her eyes were a dark brown and were rather large and innocent-looking. She was wearing an immaculately tidy and very modest black dress, with the tiniest hints of white lace at the collar, wrists, and skirt hem. She was also wearing black stockings and sensible black shoes.

"I am sorry for coming here unannounced," she continued in a more serious tone, now looking at America. "But you forgot your notes, Father."

"Thanks, Penny," he said with a smile, accepting the documents from the girl.

"Thanks, Penny," he said with a smile, accepting the documents from the girl.

"So that's one of America's kinder?" said Prussia. "I'd thought they'd be more awesome."

"I am just as mein Gott made me, sir," said Pennsylvania with obvious annoyance.

Prussia and Germany both stared at her. America shook his head and sighed.

"Everyone," America said, "This is my daughter, Penelope Sylvia Jones, the state of Pennsylvania."

"P-please, just call me 'Penny,'" Pennsylvania said uncomfortably, lowering her eyes to the floor. She hated being the center of attention. It only brought trouble.

"America," England said, with a note of confused irritation, "why is one of my former colonies German?"

"Because of the large influx of immigrants she's had from German-speaking countries since basically the beginning of her founding," America said patiently. "Because William Penn and the Quakers were more tolerant of other faiths, and so a bunch of people like the Anabaptists moved there to escape religious persecution."

"Gott doesn't discriminate," said Pennsylvania in a harsh tone. "So I shouldn't, either. Fighting over religious differences is pointless and not very dignified. Perhaps if my little brothers and sisters learned a few things about tolerance, we wouldn't have so many problems n'at."

"Not everyone's so open-minded, Penny," said America.

"And that's their problem. I think they just want to find a reason to fight. Conflict should be stamped out immediately so we can all just get on with our lives. No one should get involved in a war unless it's to protect basic human rights."

"I can't believe a state with awesome German blood is so wussy," said Prussia, coming over and poking Pennsylvania in the side, making her squeak in surprise. "You don't like to fight? What's wrong with you?"
"Prussia," America said warningly. "I'll thank you not to insult my daughter."

"Pfft, it's not my fault you didn't teach your kids how to be awesome like I taught you. All my lessons wasted. Look at this little mädchen. I bet she doesn't know the first thing about fighting."

Pennsylvania blushed in embarrassment and glared at the floor. How dare he say such things? Didn't this Gehirnverweigerer know who she was? She was Pennsylvania! The most awesome of all states (no matter what Texas or New York or California said). If only she had a gun on her, then she'd show him. No, Penny! That's wrong! Violence only begets more violence. You don't want 'Sylvia' to take over, do you?

"You probably don't even let her drink awesome beer."

To emphasize his point, Prussia pulled out a large beer stein which was filled to the brim with the amber liquid and took a sip. America blanched and began frantically trying to signal to Prussia to stop and to put away the beer. Pennsylvania had looked up and was now watching the stein with an intense stare.

"Bruder," said Germany, "there is no drinking allowed in the meeting."

"C'mon, West, lighten up," said Prussia. "You know you would drink this beer yourself if given the chance. Because it is awesome BEER!"

Pennsylvania was sweating and her left eye began to twitch. America took a few steps back, still trying to silently warn Prussia to stop.

"What is wrong with you, America?" Prussia said. "Why are you flailing your arms like a loser?" Prussia took another sip from the stein. "I don't get you Americans. You can be so awesome one moment and the next thing you know you're making laws preventing you from having beer until you're twenty-one. What kind of loser makes laws that stop people from having awesome beer?"

Pennsylvania was shaking as she stared at the beer stein. She'd stopped listening to most of what Prussia was saying, only catching the word "beer" every time he said it. In fact, the word kept echoing louder and louder in her mind each time. The strain was too much. She couldn't fight it. The siren song of the Great Tempter. She had to have it. She had to have…

"BEER!"

Prussia hardly had time to exclaim more than a short "Vas?" before he was tackled to the floor by Pennsylvania, who yanked his precious stein from his hand and chugged its awesome contents in a matter of seconds.

Everyone stared in shock at the formerly straight-laced and dignified young lady as she seemed to be overcome by a strange fit of convulsions. Something in the very fabric of her being appeared to shift before their eyes. Her head snapped back at what looked like a rather painful angle, and then shot forward. Her hair had come loose and was now hanging messily around her face, shading her eyes from view but leaving the rather unnerving smirk that had split across her face plain to see.

A low, menacing chuckle emanated from her throat.

"I'm back, bitches," she said. She raised her head up so that it was level again, revealing that her wide, brown eyes had been replaced by maliciously gleeful ones of demonic red. "Prepare to taste the awesome that is me!"
America sighed as he took in the sight of the wreckage of the once-pristine conference room. There was a giant hole in the ceiling. Water was dripping out of shattered pipes. The lights kept flickering as the wires had come loose. The window at the far end was also shattered.

Not even the nations, themselves, had been spared.

Pennsylvania had unleashed decades of pent-up warmongering rage upon them. She didn't even have any particular grudge she was acting on; it had been simple, indiscriminate carnage. By the end of it all, no fewer than thirty countries had to be hospitalized for various mental and physical injuries. Hungary was currently tending to a badly-harassed Austria, whilst also mourning the loss of her skillet which had somehow shattered on impact with the insane state's skull. The Italy brothers were, as expected, waving white flags from behind an overturned table. Spain was in the men's room washing off the copious amounts of tomato that he had been pelted with. France's hair had had an unfortunate encounter with a pair of scissors and so he was off sobbing in the corner. Japan had found himself in the situation of having a vase shoved onto his head which he was still struggling to remove. Germany just collapsed mentally and physically, unable to bear the strain of having a second version of his older brother on the loose.

Also, England had been stripped to his boxers and was left dangling precariously from a ceiling fan.

As for Prussia. Well, Prussia had gone into shell-shock for about five minutes and just watched as the girl he'd thought was so 'un-awesome' revealed that she was the second most awesome being in the world (the first being Prussia, himself, of course). Once he finally managed to snap out of it, his face had split into a sinister smirk and he joined in with the wanton destruction with his newly-appointed 'goddaughter.' Pennsylvania had preened under the attention she was receiving from the nation she owed the existence of her incredible awesomeness to. After all, Prussia was responsible for teaching Pennsylvania's father America everything he knew about warfare. So, of course the Awesome Pennsylvania would admire the Awesome Prussia. Once the two had finished their rampage, they had charged out of the building, declaring they were going to get more 'awesome beer.'

America just shook his head as he silently tallied up the cost of the damages. Furthermore, a brief check of his wallet revealed that Pennsylvania had stolen America's credit cards before she and Prussia left. America didn't even begrudge her doing that, though he pitied Prussia if Pennsylvania decided she wanted to go clothes shopping. Prussia would never be free of her if that happened.

"I tried," America said despondently. "God knows I tried."

"America!" England screamed. "Get me down from here, you bloody wanker!"

America did a quick mental calculation and gave a swift punch to the wall, causing the room to shake enough to get England to come loose from the ceiling fan and fall face-first onto the floor. Overcoming his disorientation, England shot to his feet and glared furiously at America.

"What the bloody hell was that?!"

"Prussia had beer," America said simply. "It's the thing that sets Pennsylvania off."

"And you brought her to one of the most beer-loving countries in the world?!!"

"I kind of forgot to consider that when I allowed her to come along. She just wanted to reconnect to her heritage."

A large chunk of concrete fell from above with a loud crash behind him.

"I'd say she's definitely reconnecting with her heritage," England snapped. "A very Prussian part of
Massachusetts was halfway through his fourth cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee that morning when he got the phone call.

It seemed that Sylvia had returned and America needed some backup. Considering the fact that Massachusetts was the only person Pennsylvania listened to most of the time besides their father, and sometimes Ohio, he was, naturally, the best one to bring in under the circumstances.

So, after booking a seat on the first flight he could find to Berlin, stocking up on as many snacks as he could, quickly filling a suitcase, listening to Aerosmith music in the car, reading "House of the Seven Gables" on the plane, and flirting with some cute girls at the baggage claim, Massachusetts made his way to the conference building to find exactly what he expected.

Pennsylvania had clearly been having fun, if the signs of wanton destruction were enough evidence.

"Fuckin' hell," said Massachusetts. "Pennsylvanian really did a numbah on this place."

"Oh, Johnny, dude," America said when he saw his son. "Good flight?"

"Can't complain."

The other nations were watching Massachusetts warily, especially England. Considering the last time Massachusetts had shown up he had been dressed as a Native American and his and his brothers' antics had nearly resulted in England being tarred and feathered, no one was exactly certain why they should trust him to get the insane Prussia the Second under control. In fact, England said as much once he saw who it was that America had called in to help.

"Look, Britty-boy," said Massachusetts, trying hard to resist the urge to get another crate of tea and dump it on him, "My sis and I, we got this thing. We got…what's it called? A psycho link?"

"You mean 'psychic,' kiddo?" said America.

"Yeah, that's it, Dad." Though his smile indicated he knew exactly what he had meant. "P.A. and I got a psychic link. I know how to deal with this."

"You really can help us with her?" England pressed.

"Ding-ding, light dawns on Mahblehead." He smirked at his father and pointed at England with his thumb. "This fuckin' guy."

Before England could question what the hell that meant (though he was certain he'd just been insulted), Pennsylvania and Prussia returned to the conference room. They were both laughing obnoxiously, waving around beer steins, and making insulting comments about the people they hated most (for Prussia it was Austria, for Pennsylvania it was New Jersey). Pennsylvania had also chosen to change her attire from the stiff and modest black dress to rather form-fitting black and red clothes that looked vaguely militaristic in style. Pennsylvania noticed Massachusetts and dragged Prussia over to meet him.

"Mein Awesome Godfather, this is my less awesome than me but still slightly awesome little
"Bruder," she said, giving Massachusetts a friendly knock on the head in greeting. "How goes it, Mass? Did you make York cry, yet?"

"Not yet, Sylv," said Massachusetts. "But hope springs eternal and all that shit."

"So, what brings your less awesome self here, Johann?"

"I was wonderin' if you'd, oh, I dunno, like to help me practice for the recital?"

That certainly had Pennsylvania's attention. Her red eyes seemed less manic and more contemplative.

"Recital?" said Prussia curiously. "What recital?"

"Sylvie and I, we both love music and like to have recitals, don't we, Sylv?" said Massachusetts with a knowing grin.

"Ja, that we awesomely do," said Pennsylvania.

"And, as it just so happens, I brought along some instruments and some sheet music."

Massachusetts held up a violin case and a binder filled with copies of classical music. He also had a second, smaller case, containing his flute. If he'd had the time or resources, he would probably have brought a piano; one glance at that and Pennsylvania wouldn't even have hesitated.

"Give it here!" Pennsylvania demanded, snatching the violin case out of her younger brother's hands and taking out the precious instrument. "And you'd better not trip my awesome self up with your talentless hooting."

"Yeah, whatevah, sis."

Something changed in Pennsylvania the moment she set that violin on her shoulder. She seemed to be stiffer, more formal and composed. When she and Massachusetts began to play, having selected a Bach duet for their respective instruments, the two worked flawlessly and enthralled those who heard them, even the nations who had previously been rather terrified of them.

When the two states finally put down their instruments, it was clear that Pennsylvania had transformed once more before their eyes. Her red gaze had changed back to the brown shade from earlier, but they held a hint of haughtiness about them that had not been there previously.

"Hmph, adequate," she said in a slightly snippy tone. "Not Boston Symphony Orchestra level, but sufficient for the time being. I expect you to practice more or I will be highly disappointed."

"Yeah, you'll probably start ranting at me by aggressively playing Chopin," Massachusetts replied. "Anyway, sis, this has been wicked pissah and all, but I got a teleconference on renewable energy to get to. See you latah."

Massachusetts whistled the tune of "The Road to Boston" to himself as he walked past the dumbfounded nations, who were now trying to figure out what to make of Pennsylvania's newest shift in personality.

"Staring is rude," she snapped at them. "I will not stand for it. Father, I must protest this most inappropriate treatment I am receiving."

Everyone kept staring. Prussia looked like his whole world had shattered.

"Penelope," America said, "they're not trying to be rude, they just didn't expect you."
Pennsylvania gave an irritated huff.

"I suppose it is understandable," she said. "Considering how unrefined Sylvia is. I mean, just look at these clothes she has saddled me with." She grimaced in disgust at her attire. "How tasteless. I look better in blue and she knows it. Father, I require the use of your credit cards."

"Sylvia took them."

Pennsylvania blinked at him and checked her pockets.

"Ah, so she did."

Suddenly, the door opened again and Massachusetts was standing there with an apologetic smile.

"Hey, sis, I must be a chucklehead for fahgetting," he said. "I meant to tell you I brought ya some Tastykakes."

He held up a couple boxes of various miniature cakes. Pennsylvania's eyes zeroed in on them.

"Oh, thank you, John," she said. "You did remember to get me my Butterscotch Krimpets, right?"

"Yeah."

"And the Dreamies?"

"I still say they'ah just Twinkies, but, yeah."

"They are not the same. Dreamies are forty calories lighter and do not have that disgusting oily residue, you ignorant fool. Now, I kindly suggest you surrender those Kakes, or there will be trouble."

Massachusetts rolled his eyes and handed them over before turning and leaving again. Pennsylvania held the boxes of baked goods to her as if they were chests of valuable jewels and then gave a dignified look to America.

"Father, I will meet up with you later and go over my shopping expenses," she said. "Have a successfully beneficial and productive meeting." She exited the room and started walking down the hall.

"Other way, Penelope," America called after her.

"Oh, yes, you are correct." She turned down the other way and made her departure.

No one said anything for some time, until Prussia slowly leveled his red gaze, blazing with raw fury, upon poor Austria.

"You," Prussia said, his tone dripping with venom. "You tainted mein awesome goddaughter!"

As Prussia lunged for Austria, Hungary, who had managed to obtain a new skillet, bashed him over the head before he could reach her ex-husband, who, for his part, seemed to be enduring a deep psychological discomfort.

It goes without saying that the conference was, once more, ended early.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: Do I really have to explain the sheer German-ness of Pennsylvania's heritage? How about the fact that the Constitution was published in German alongside English because a third of the population of Pennsylvania spoke German at the time? Also, the King of Prussia Mall in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. So, ja.

I've seen the 'Pennsylvania is Prussia 2.0' trope and I just love it. I also love the multiple-personality trope. The reason why Pennsylvania has a disorder similar to California's is less to do with politics and more to do with her experiences. She initially only had one personality, which was a fairly even blend of all her different quirks and mood shifts, but what she went through in history changed her and caused her mind to split into different people in order to cope with the things she has seen and done. Also, if we're keeping with a more upbeat version of this, let us go with the notion that the sudden influx of Austrians to the US in the wake of the German occupation of Austria caused the Prussian side of Pennsylvania to revolt at having to share a space with Austrians (or something).

Pennsylvania is where Valley Forge is located. During the American Revolution, Baron von Steuben was brought in to train the American troops in how to fight like a real army. Also, in Hetalia (from what little I know of the manga), it was mentioned that Prussia personally trained America in how to fight England.

N'at – West Pennsylvanian term, used as an extender like "et cetera," is a contraction of "and (all) that."

Gehirnverweigerer – a German insult that means "brain-denier," someone who doesn't use his brain.

Johann – German equivalent of "John."

Light dawns on Marblehead – I found this on a list of Massachusetts slang terms. It apparently refers to when a dense or clueless person finally realizes something.

Pennsylvania has one of the highest Austrian populations in the US (it is behind only California and New York).

I depicted "normal" Pennsylvania as being staunchly opposed to unnecessary conflict as a way of being ironic. Pennsylvania is America's main support base in military conflict and one of the main sources of troops and supplies (at least, it has been so in much of US history); it has always been a state that has leapt at the chance to show its awesome military might, even pushing for war to be declared when others objected (in particular, the War of 1812); in fact, during WWII, more Medals of Honor were awarded to Pennsylvanians than people from any other state. My Pennsylvania really enjoys fighting when she's in her "Prussia mode" but will only tolerate conflict the rest of the time if it is in regards to the protection of civil liberty. Her Austrian side is meant to reflect the more sophisticated, artistic nature of the state.

I've also heard that Pennsylvania and New Jersey are rivals. Not sure how accurate that is, though, please let me know if it's not true. I read that it had to do with the fact that an exiled Spanish king chose to build his new home in New Jersey instead of Pennsylvania, prompting the Pennsylvanians to derisively refer to New Jersey as "New Spain."

Pennsylvania and Massachusetts are both lovers of the performing arts, especially music. All the states love music, but these two take classical very seriously (as does Vermont,
Massachusetts also loves Dunkin' Donuts coffee and is a leader in energy preservation (it has the fifth lowest rate of energy consumption in the US).

Pennsylvania has been referred to as the "snack food capital of the world." It's famous for its pretzel companies, Utz Quality Foods (including the famous potato chips), Hershey's chocolate, Tastykake, and much, much more.

"The Road to Boston" is the state ceremonial march of Massachusetts.
Ohio took another bite from the tomato in his hand as he approached the hotel suite. Under his other arm he held a large box wrapped in colored paper.

Massachusetts had called him a couple days earlier to tell him all about Pennsylvania's rampage. Knowing Penny, she would likely be brooding in her room over the embarrassment of shifting personalities again. He still remembered the time she committed herself to a mental institution when "Sylvia" started getting more aggressive in the early twentieth century. Considering what mental health care was like back in those days, Ohio was fairly certain that it only made things worse. He was the only one who hadn't been surprised when "Penelope" came along around WWII; frankly, he was just astonished she hadn't shown up earlier.

Still, he missed the big sister from his childhood. The one who could balance the ruthless warmonger, delicate and sophisticated lady, and modest, hard-working, pacifist farm girl personalities as one person. Many people, even their own siblings, considered "Penny" the "normal" Pennsylvania, but Ohio knew her better than that.

A knock on the door prompted a shuffling sound from inside.

"C'mon, Penn.," Ohio said patiently. "It's just me."

The door opened and haughty brown eyes took in his appearance in an appraising manner. Pennsylvania was wearing a very stylish, royal blue shirt and a ruffled white skirt; no hint of stiff and starched dresses or else of tight-fitting leather trousers. So it was still "Penelope" in charge, then.

"Brother," she said, "while I appreciate your consideration in stopping by, I must ask that you leave me in peace."

"I was hoping to speak with Penny."

"Penny is not in the mood to come back out anytime soon. Sylvia's actions have convinced her to let me remain, for the time being."

"And I take it that you will be sticking around indefinitely?"

"Do you think I enjoy being out like this? Hmph, I am just here to keep Sylvia in line. Penny will return when she doesn't have to worry about people thinking poorly of her. Now, I suggest you leave."

"I have chocolates."

Pennsylvania paused and looked at him.
"What kind?" she said. "It's not Godiva chocolate, is it?"

"No, it's homemade."

"Fine, you may come in."

Ohio smiled and entered the hotel suite. There was a small lounge area with two sofas and a little coffee table. He set the box filled with the homemade confections on the table and took a seat. He also finished the last few bites of his tomato before flicking away the stem.

"I apologize for not offering you some coffee, brother," said Pennsylvania, who took a seat across from him. "But the suite didn't come with a coffee machine."

"I'd say 'no worries,' but you know I never mean it when I do."

"Hmm, what did you wish to speak with Penny about?"

"Sylvia."

"Oh, I am certain there is nothing wrong with discussing Sylvia with Penny." The sarcasm in her tone was sharper than a serpent's tooth.

"It needs to be discussed. Mass might be able to laugh it all off, but he wasn't at Byberry when…"

Ohio trailed off at the pained and slightly frightened expression that crossed his sister's face. Byberry was not something commonly discussed in the family. Pennhurst, either. When Ohio had heard that Pennsylvania had had herself committed, he knew something bad was going to happen. He'd just never imagined what he would find in that horrible, God-forsaken hellhole.

"Sorry," Ohio continued. "That…that was crossing the line."

"No, it is all right," Pennsylvania said quietly. She then twitched suddenly. "I believe that Penny is willing to speak with you, now." She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, they were brighter and less harsh. "Ah, hello, Godfrey."

"Penny."

There had been a question lingering in the family about why Penny and Penelope were separate when they both seemed so stern and proper. The fact was, though, that Penny was what remained of Pennsylvania's innocence. Penny repressed her feelings of anger, no matter how much they burned her, and shielded herself behind a wall of virtue and charity. Penelope acted as her intermediary and counselor; she took care of the social expectations of Pennsylvania, handling the politics and cultural endeavors, and also protected her from the memories that haunted her. As a result, Penelope maintained some similarities of temperament to Penny, but she had a cunning and underhanded side that matched Sylvia's raw strength and rage. Penny was what was left when the fighting will of Sylvia and the intellectual savvy of Penelope separated from the pure and humble girl that was Penny.

"You wished to speak with me?" said Pennsylvania.

"Yeah. I want to know what made Sylvia so worked up."

"That man, Prussia, had beer."

"I know. Mass told me. But what made Sylvia attack the nations when she got loose?"
"She…she was angry. I…I was angry."

"What made you angry, Penny?"

"He, Prussia, said I was weak. Sylvia didn't like that and decided to prove him wrong. She went a little crazy and started running around all over the place."

"One might think Sylvia was on her Rumspringa."

"She's been on her Rumspringa since the day she began her existence."

Ohio chuckled and Pennsylvania gave him a small, honest smile. It had been like this for some years, now. Ohio and Massachusetts were the only ones who really seemed to see her and understand what she needed. It was funny, too, because it used to be Pennsylvania who looked after the two of them.

1813 – Boston

"How could you do something so stupid!" Pennsylvania snapped as she bandaged the wounds on Massachusetts' arm. "What did I teach you, John? Never go into a sea battle with only one ship."

"The Chesapeake was perfectly sound," Massachusetts grumbled. "I could've taken that damn British tub."

"It's that kind of overconfidence that could've gotten you killed, you fool! In fact, it's exactly what got your captain killed!"

"You told me I should be doing more to help."

"Yes, by using your brain, dummkopf. You don't see me charging blindly into battle. Honestly, you men and your pride."

Massachusetts muttered something unkind under his breath. Standing beside the bed where his older brother was laid-up, Ohio looked tearfully up at Pennsylvania.

"Penn, are we gonna lose the war?" Ohio asked.

"No, we are not!" Pennsylvania said fiercely. "Never, ever think that. We are the United States. Vater kicked England out before and, by Gott, he will do so again. And faster, this time, because he has us to help him."

"But, I'm scared, Penn."

"You should be. England is not an enemy to be taken lightly, even if we are awesome enough to beat him. Which we are. You do not go rushing headfirst into a battle without making a plan."

"Can't you give me a little sympathy, Sylv?" said Massachusetts. "I got blasted with a cannonball and knocked over the side of the ship. I nearly drowned."

"Believe me, John, I am furious about this. I am mustering all the strength I can and I will exact vengeance for your suffering. Unlike those spineless cowards Delaware and New Jersey, I know when not to back down."

"Penny," said Ohio. "I don't like this war. I want things to go back to normal."

"I know, my little Schatz. War is not supposed to be fun, but there is a reason why we fight. Look
outside."

Ohio walked over to the nearby window and looked out at the bustling port of Boston.

"You see those people?" Pennsylvania continued. "Those men, women, and children? They are what we fight for. Father risked everything to give them their freedom and we must do the same. It is our duty to face anything that comes our way to keep them safe from those who seek to do them harm."

"You mean, like a hero would do?"

"I suppose so."

"I'm gonna be a hero, Penny! Just like you and Papa."

Pennsylvania smiled and ruffled Ohio's hair.

"I'm sure you will be."

"Penn? Penn?"

"Hmm? Oh, my apologies, Godfrey."

"Are you all right?" said Ohio worriedly. "You got a little spacey, there."

"Yes, I am perfectly acceptable."

"Sure." He did not sound convinced.

"Really. Perhaps it would be best if I returned home. I don't wish to cause any further disturbance."

"Hell with that, Penn. C'mon, I'll be with you. I won't even drink any booze while I'm with you, just so you don't feel lured into another Sylvia episode."

"Ha, as if that's a sacrifice. You only drink that cheap stuff, anyway."

"I just like the way it tastes," Ohio said a bit defensively. "It's better than the stupid craft brews that Michigan chugs down."

"You really do hate him, don't you?"

"So, so much. But, hey, this ain't about him. Let's just have something to eat and chill for a while. We don't even have to leave, there's a stove in the kitchenette. I'll cook."

"If you're going to cook, it had better not be chili."

"Actually, I was thinking chicken paprikash. And there's nothing wrong with my chili."

"Whatever you say, Godfrey."

The world conference finally managed to pick up to its normal standard of effectiveness.

Which wasn't really saying much, but it hadn't been interrupted by America's crazy children for a few days. Everyone was still rather tense, though, knowing that America hadn't sent Pennsylvania back to the U.S. even after all the trouble she had caused. America, for his part, didn't seem too
worried. Prussia had just been distraught that his "awesome goddaughter" had "loser Austria syndrome" hindering her awesomeness; it had taken a few more whacks from Hungary's skillet to get him to back off from his revenge attempts on Austria.

So, that meeting concluded with everyone packing up as quickly as they could in case Pennsylvania decided to return and wreak more destruction upon them.

Of course, the crowd of nations trying to hurry on their way out froze when they saw the very state they had been hoping to avoid standing just outside the building. She was wearing the plain black dress again, so they knew she was not in either her Prussian or Austrian mode. She was also smiling and laughing in a way that wasn't absolutely terrifying, so the nations relaxed a little.

Beside her was a teenage boy. He had a handsome face with elegant features and a charming smile. His eyes were a greenish-blue shade, almost teal, and seemed rather piercing. His light brown hair was long and pulled into a ponytail that had a small red carnation fastened into his hair tie. He wore his shirt a little bit open, showing some of his chest; it was a sight which more than a few female (and even some male) nations appreciated. He also wore brown Sperry's shoes.

"Penn, Ohio," America called out to them, waving cheerfully while the other nations watched with wariness.

"Hey, Dad." Ohio said as he and Pennsylvania came over. "Penny and I have just been out sight-seeing and decided to wanted to see if you were up to having dinner."

"Sure, dudes. We're all done here for the day."

"Good," said Pennsylvania calmly. "But, before we go, I just have something to say." She turned to the group of nations, many of whom flinched under her gaze, as though waiting for it to turn red again. "I just wish to apologize for Sylvia's behavior and any harm or indignities she inflicted on you. It was incredibly unkind."

No one was quite sure what to make of the situation. Well, except for Prussia, who decided he wanted his "awesome goddaughter" back.

"Nein, the awesome do not make apologies for their awesomeness," he said. He then started looking through a briefcase he had with him (it didn't have any papers in it, he just brought it to smuggle booze and snacks into the meeting). "I brought more awesome beer. It will make you awesome again and-

CLANG!

A cast-iron skillet collided with Prussia's head. Everyone thought, at first, that it was Hungary wielding it. Instead, they saw a furious Ohio standing there glaring at the now very dazed Prussia.

"Be glad I didn't bring my pitchfork, you douchenozzle," he said.

"Look at the happy stars everywhere," Prussia slurred before passing out. A lump started to form on his head from the injury.

America winced. The next 'Awesome Trio Club' meeting was definitely going to be awkward. That was for sure.
Author's Note: Someone asked me about what the differences between "normal" Pennsylvania and her third self really was, so I decided to clarify. "Normal" Pennsylvania, or "Penny," is meant to reflect the stereotype that all Pennsylvanians are uptight Amish people (seeing as Pennsylvania is the Amish capital of the US) or else as goody-goody Quakers (being the Quaker State), whereas "Penelope" (despite being a newer personality) actually represents Pennsylvania's inclination towards intellectual and cultural pursuits and her political cunning. "Sylvia" is meant to be her military legacy and strength.

I have another reason for dividing Pennsylvania's personality. The state, itself, has pretty strong regional divisions. The West, Central, and the Northeastern/Southeastern regions are all very unique and have some strong cultural differences. Of course, with this logic, most of the states should have multiple personalities, but I just thought it really worked for Pennsylvania (plus, I liked how it worked in "America and his United States" by JerichosPhantom).

The tomato is the state fruit of Ohio (and Arkansas and Tennessee).

Godiva is the enemy of Hershey, and it is treason for any Pennsylvanian to eat it. I like Godiva, personally, but this is just a Pennsylvania stereotype I read about.

Apparently, in Ohio, "no worries" or "no problem" or "it's fine" should never be taken seriously. People who say any of those, from what I've heard, never actually mean them.

Byberry and Pennhurst are two of the most notorious insane asylums in American history. Both of them in Pennsylvania. They were infamous for the rampant abuse and torture of patients. Byberry's conditions have even been compared to those of Nazi concentration camps. Also, one of the most common reasons for someone to be committed to an asylum in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was alcoholism. So, it's rather telling that beer is what sets Pennsylvania off.

Rumspringa – "running around" is an Amish rite-of-passage in which teenagers in the Amish community are permitted a period of time in which to indulge in wild behavior and to see if they would be more content outside the community before receiving Baptism.

Schatz – German for "treasure."

1813 – The American ship Chesapeake was captured by the British ship Shannon in a one-on-one naval battle just off the Boston Harbor. It was one of the bloodiest naval battles of the day.

Delaware and New Jersey voted against declaring war on Britain in 1812 while Pennsylvania voted very strongly in favor of it. Pennsylvania did have to eat her words about Delaware and New Jersey being cowards because they defended themselves from British invasions rather fiercely with their militias and contributed enormously to the war effort.

Ohio has always wanted to be a hero like his father. Jerry Siegal and Joe Shuster, the creators of the Superman comics, were from Cleveland; you do the math on this one.

Ohio has the largest Hungarian population in the US. It is also second only to Pennsylvania in terms of its Amish population.
The comment about Ohio's chili is a reference to Cincinnati's Skyline Chili, which, apparently, only tastes good to people from Cincinnati who grew up on it.

The red carnation is the state (cultivated) flower of Ohio. Sperry's are a type of shoe which Ohioans are sometimes stereotyped to wear frequently.

I mentioned the Awesome Trio both in this and the last chapter. Prussia, Denmark, and America are the Awesome Trio and I really want to write about them in the future. I found this incredibly 'awesome' fic, "Aint' No Rest for the Wicked," by blommabelle, which shows the absolutely hilarious hijinks of the Awesome Trio. America is also a girl in the fic (and I love fem!America fics; if I could have just one Hetalia character be female in canon, it would be America).

Remember, folks, if you find any errors in my information, my writing, or my cultural characterizations, please, PLEASE let me know so I can revise and correct them. As a writer, I need feedback in order to develop my skills.
I must remind you, the states were never a secret. The nations are just a bit oblivious. Also, to my fellow Americans, remember to love and appreciate our national park system and our country's beautiful natural scenery, in general.

The conference ended, as most world conferences do, with essentially no progress having been made and a bunch of nations even more pissed off than they had been before.

Of course, another situation soon made itself evident as the nations packed up to return home. The G7 (not G8 at the moment, considering Russia was not in the mood to play nice with others) had a conference of their own scheduled back at America's place next and there wasn't any reason why they shouldn't make their way over to America's that day instead of stopping back at their homes. As an added twist of fate, they all found themselves on the same flight as America and his children.

The G7 nations were incredibly tense as the plane took off. At least Germany had managed to keep Prussia from sneaking onto the flight, as that would only have resulted in disaster due to the fact that the lunatic kept trying to give Pennsylvania beer whenever he saw her.

Still, being trapped in a plane for hours with America and his ticking time-bomb children was leaving the other countries very unnerved. America kept telling jokes and laughing in that obnoxious way of his. Pennsylvania just quietly listened to some music on her headphones while Ohio seemed very interested in a magazine he was reading. Whenever America asked his son what he was looking at, the kid would blush and mutter something about "home and garden" sections.

When the plane finally landed, America informed the G7s that the trip wasn't over yet. They had hoped he would simply choose to have the meeting in D.C. or New York, but it was a trend in G7 meetings that they were not generally held in the same place twice. After hugging Pennsylvania and Ohio goodbye, America led his fellow nations over to a smaller, private aircraft. And a smiling North Carolina.

"Well, hey, ya'll," she said brightly. "Mr. England, sir, Mr. France, it's nice to see you both again."

She vigorously shook both men's hands and turned to introduce herself to the nations she hadn't met before.

"Wait, don't I know you from somewhere?" Germany said.

"Oh," North Carolina said brightly. "You're that Germany fella. Yeah, you might remember me from 1943 in Tunisia."

She was right. During World War II, the Afrika Korps under the command of Field Marshal Rommel had been captured in Tunisia in May of 1943, with Germany, himself, being among those captured. Well, Germany and Italy.

"Germany!" Italy screamed. "It's the crazy scary commando person!"
Romano, who was in the group, too, also screamed and started ranting at the American state that "a deal was a deal" and that she wasn't allowed to fight them ever again or force them to eat any disgusting foreign prison food. North Carolina just blinked at them in an innocently confused fashion, as though she hadn't the faintest idea why the Italian brothers could possibly be afraid of her.

Germany would never admit it, but the girl had actually been rather terrifying on the African front. He hadn't known she was a girl at the time, as she'd had her hair cut to military standard back then, but she had shown herself to be a shrieking demon who charged straight through enemy lines without a thought for the number of bullets coming her way. When Germany and Italy were captured, they were briefly sent to a POW camp in North Carolina, where they were made to watch a bunch of American movies; it wasn't until now that Germany realized it was also that same girl who had been operating the film projector. Romano had managed to negotiate Italy's release from the POW camp, but Germany ended up having to escape on his own.

There was one other time Germany was at that POW camp after being captured by another group of soldiers, which had included the one from the last time. It was in 1945. His stay at that North Carolina POW camp was, again, brief, but he was made to watch some new films that had been made of what the Allies discovered once they pressed into the lands Germany had taken. The things he saw made him realize a dark truth that had been kept just out of sight for years. When Germany escaped that time, he returned home a different man...a man who knew that the only way to end the killing of millions of people was to cut the head off the serpent, himself.

He had always silently thanked the mysterious soldier who captured him.

"Hey, you gettin' on the plane or what, sir?" North Carolina's voice cut into his thoughts.

"Vas?" he said.

She was looking at him a little impatiently and Germany realized that the others were already boarding. Germany quickly picked up his suitcase and followed them. Once everyone was seated, North Carolina went over the procedures in case of emergency and told them where they could find snacks and beverages before taking off.

The nations sat in tense silence for a long while, mostly because they were clinging to their seats in terror at the thought of a teenage girl being in charge of flying the plane.

"So, dudes, I thought I'd do something totally new and unexpected for our meeting," America said brightly.

"America-san," said Japan. "Please, I do not think I can handle surprises."

"Aw, Japan, buddy, I promise that this isn't anything bad."

"You expect us to trust that, right now?" Romano snapped. "One of your crazy children is flying the damn plane. Any minute, I expect her to turn the plane off in midair just to see what will happen."

"I heard that," came the sing-song response over the plane's intercom, causing Romano to startle.

"Well, I, for one, am intrigued by what our dear Amérique has planned," said France. "We wouldn't happen to be going to, say, Louisiana, would we?"

"Huh, sorry, French dude," said America. "Maybe next time."

"Quel dommage," France said with a pout.
"We're not going anywhere near those three who attacked me, are we?" said England.

"Dudes, I'm not telling," said America. "But I hope you all packed hiking boots."

"Ve~ Please tell me we aren't going to be doing a lot of walking," said Italy. "I get tired easily and my feet swell up if I wear boots too long and I need to have access to pasta and-"

"Easy, there, little Italian dude. It'll be cool. I promise."

"Yeah," North Carolina added over the intercom. "Ya'll are goin' to Wyatt's place. It's right gorgeous out thataways."

"Shh, Kitty, don't spoil it."

"Oh, sorry, Pa. Anyhow, folks, just sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride. Hey, how 'bout I play tour guide for ya'll? I love to tell folks everythin' I know 'bout my home turf.

"If you look out your windows, you will see the verdant mountains of Appalachia. This mountain range spans one-thousand and five-hundred miles, that's two-thousand and four-hundred kilometers for ya'll foreign folks. The highest elevation of the Appalachians is my own lovely Mount Mitchell, standin' at six-thousand, six-hundred, and eighty-four feet; or two-thousand and thirty-seven meters. At one point, these mountains reached elevations comparable to those of the Alps; however, erosion and other land factors reduced their size and even separated them from the Ouachita Mountains, located at the homes of my brothers Arkansas and Oklahoma.

"The name 'Appalachia' is derived from 'Apalchen,' the name of a native tribe near what is now Tallahassee, Florida, as translated by the members of the Narváez expedition in 1528. It is the fourth-oldest surviving European place name in the U.S. However, until the nineteenth century, the range was more commonly referred to as the Allegheny Mountains. It was around this same time that the writer, Washington Irving, author of the short stories 'Sleepy Hollow' and 'Rip Van Winkle,' proposed that the United States be renamed to either 'Allegheny' or 'Appalachia.'"

North Carolina continued in her lengthy description of everything she knew about the mountains; which included everything from flora and fauna to the fact that, during the time of Pangea, the mountains were once joined to Little Atlas in Morocco.

Japan had his camera pointed at the mountain scenery below and was frantically taking pictures. The Italy brothers steadily lost interest and fell asleep from the sheer bombardment of information. France and England both listened politely, at first, but soon began to look bored and started doing little things to irritate each other; like kicking each other. Canada listened for a few minutes before getting out one of the books he brought to read on the flight. Germany actually listened attentively, soaking up the wealth of data like a sponge and filing it away in his very organized memory.

America actually sat quietly, his eyes closed and a smile on his face. He knew the information, already, as the land was part of him, but he always enjoyed hearing about it. Most nations liked to hear about their land, because it was an extension of themselves and they took deep pride in it.

Once they were far enough away from the Appalachians, North Carolina began to tell them about some of the towns and cities they passed over. She especially delighted in pointing out places with amusing names. She just would not or could not stop talking. Eventually, the plane began to soar over higher, rougher, and rockier land. Tall peaks and bright mountain sunlight engulfed them as they started to descend into a valley.

"Attention, ya'll," North Carolina announced. "This is yer captain speakin'. Please, fasten your safety
belts. We will soon be landin' at Jackson Hole Airport, just outside of the lovely town of Jackson in Teton County, Wyoming. This area is most noted for the Teton mountain range."

The nations other than America and Canada just blinked in confusion. They'd never heard of the place. Ever. Of course, France got a slightly lecherous grin on his face when he heard the name of the mountains.

The little plane steadily made its way down to the tarmac.

"Thank ya'll right kindly for flyin' Air Caroline," North Carolina announced. "We hope ya'll have enjoyed yer flight and have a pleasant day. Remember, folks: Contents in overhead luggage compartments may have shifted durin' the flight."

The nations collected their things and made their way out of the plane, following America's direction to head inside the small airport. The airport, itself, looked more like a ski lodge, save only for the fact that it had a runway and airplanes outside it. As the group passed through the building and back outside, the mountain air finally hit them. There was something crisp and clean about it, almost sweet, without the heaviness of humidity or an overabundance of pollution; even the fact that they were at an airport didn't seem to alter the almost dizzying freshness of the air.

"Well, hey, folks," said a cheerful voice from nearby.

The boy was a teenager, but he was a bit bulky and broad-shouldered, making him appear a bit older. His eyes were a dark blue and his dark blonde hair was a little messy, despite being combed back. His skin had a light tan, though there were a few freckles dotting his cheeks and nose. He was dressed in a park ranger's uniform.

"Wyatt!" America called out.

The boy rushed over and pulled America into a tight hug.

"Dad, it's great to see ya," he said. "And these must be your friends here for the meeting. Nice to meet you, guys. I'm Wyatt Laramie Jones, the state of Wyoming."

As the kid shook hands with the nations, he froze when he got to Germany and Germany stared back in amazement.

"Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?" Wyoming said.

Germany didn't answer. This was the second time that day in which he'd seen a state he knew from World War II. It had been when Germany and Prussia were on that stupid spying mission that their stupid bosses had stupidly ordered them to go on. The two of them were looking through a box filled with bald eagle belt-buckles and porn when one of the American soldiers came into the tent, having heard the noise. Germany had nearly been caught out in his deception while Prussia hid in the box, but Germany had managed to fool the young man at the last moment. That soldier, which Germany had assumed was a human, was now standing right in front of him with that same look of suspicion on his face.

"N-nein," Germany said. "You must have me mistaken for someone else."

The state leaned in close with his scrutinizing gaze, just as he had done decades ago.

"You talk funny," he said. "But I could swear I've met you someplace."

"Wyatt, kid," said America. "I think you're freaking Germany out."
"Hmm." Wyoming gave Germany one last look before smiling brightly at the rest of the group. "All right, everyone. I brought us some sweet rides to get to my place."

"Ah, thank goodness," said Japan. "Your cars have enough space for all of us?"

"Cars? What cars? I'm talking about these bad boys." Wyoming gestured over his shoulder where a team of beautiful horses waited patiently.

"Wait, we're riding on horseback?" said England in disbelief.

"Ve~ Just like in those Western movies," Italy said cheerfully.

"Oh, great," Romano added sarcastically. "Now I get to add saddle sores on top of jet-lag."

"My hair will get ruined," said France.

"I am not comfortable with relying on creatures that can throw me off of them for transport," said Japan.

"Quit your bitching," said Wyoming. There wasn't any real bite to his tone, but it was clear he didn't have patience for whining. "It's not that far. Besides, you get to stretch your legs and get fresh air after being on planes for hours and hours."

"Don't we at least get riding helmets?" said England.

"Riding…what?"

"Helmets."

"…Sorry, pal, I'm not familiar with the term. Now get on the darn horses already."

Wyoming's house was a large lodge out on wide acres of open land. It was a beautiful, scenic spot with a glorious view of the snow-capped mountains. The lodge, despite its large size, was cozy and inviting; it also had a very noticeable cowboy feel in the western decorations and the fact that he kept guns in just about every drawer and cupboard (the nations agreed that Switzerland and Liechtenstein would probably have felt right at home). The walls were covered in dozens of pictures of the national parks located nearby.

Wyoming also kept bison on the grounds of the property (they were not buffalo, as Wyoming repeatedly and vehemently insisted; buffalo come from Africa and Asia, it was the noble bison which roamed the wilds of America's plains and also happened to be the national mammal of the U.S.).

"Just don't mess with them," Wyoming warned the nations as they stood a cautious distance from the herd. "Bison can get annoyed easily and you don't want to-"

"Ve~ Hi, big buffalo creatures," Italy said, running over to a nearby bison.

"Italy, no!" Germany yelled.

"You idiota, Veneziano," Romano added. "Get away from that damn thing!"

"What did I just say?!" Wyoming called out.

But Italy, clearly not sensing the danger, decided to try petting the bison. The bison did not take kindly to that and grumbled and snorted angrily. Italy's natural preservation instincts quickly kicked
in at that point and he began running back towards the lodge, screaming that he surrendered and waving a white flag. The bison soon tired of trying to keep up with him.

"Wow, he sure can run fast for a little guy," said Wyoming.

"Ja, if only he could do it when he's not in retreat," Germany replied. However, he froze up when Wyoming leveled him with another searching look.

"I know we've met before."

The following day, Wyoming led them – once again on horseback – out towards Yellowstone National Park. America had apparently decided that sitting around in a stuffy conference room for the G7 meeting was boring and that he should change things up a little and host the meeting in the great outdoors.

As they were riding up to the entrance to the park, they saw a nervous group of hikers and other park patrons gathering around the ranger's post. Wyoming, who had very good hearing, caught what they were saying.

"Uh-oh, sounds like there's a pronghorn causing some trouble," said Wyoming, dismounting from his horse. "You folks stay here. I'll deal with this."

"What is a pronghorn?" said England.

"Ohonhonhon, the name sounds rather sexy," France said with a smirk. "I have noticed that about quite a number of things and places around here. Amérique, I am beginning to suspect that you have a wonderfully dirty mind like moi."

Suddenly, a very annoyed antelope-like creature charged in, frightening the tourists.

"That's a pronghorn," said America.

Wyoming stood in the path of the animal, which scraped at the ground with a hoof, and stared it down. The pronghorn lowered its head and shot towards him. Wyoming caught the animal head-on and gently lifted it up by its horns and carried it as if it weighed next-to-nothing. He set it down a good distance from the staring nations and park-goers and began to lecture the animal on proper behavior as though it were a troublesome child before ordering it to go to its pasture and think about what it did.

"Whoa, sorry about that, everyone," Wyoming said, returning to the group. "The animals can sometimes get a little testy, but nothing to worry about. It's just part of nature's plan and stuff."

Everyone except America and Canada was gaping at him.

It was a strange experience having their meeting outside in the fresh air and sunshine, but a pleasant one. The group didn't argue as much, as the simple beauty around them made fighting seem rather trivial and pointless in the face of the untouched natural wonder surrounding them. France and Northern Italy adored the aesthetic beauty of the mountains, woods, and rivers as it spoke to their naturally artistic sides. Southern Italy liked the fact that they weren't sitting around in a drab conference room for once. Japan enjoyed the tranquility, and the cute animals. England wasn't too certain how to respond, as he privately admitted that he had forgotten that America consisted of far more than bustling urban centers like New York City; it was a pleasantly surprising change of pace. Germany, for all his obsession with order, was actually very fond of the outdoors and usually spent
what little personal vacation time he had hiking, so this arrangement for the G7 conference was actually rather relaxing for him.

However, Germany was still Germany and would not allow any slacking off from the work they were there to do. Everyone had to provide their input on global economic governance, international security, and energy policy, as always. Wyoming just watched the proceedings with that persistently inquisitive expression as he tried to figure out where he had seen Germany before.

America and Wyoming also insisted that they not stay in one place for the whole conference as there was so much to see. Additionally, Wyoming would show them some of the natural wonders of the place and give them some information on them when the group had their breaks.

From geyser...

"This is the Old Faithful geyser," said Wyoming. "It was the first geyser in the park to be given a name. The name is attributed to the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, which noted the fact that the geyser erupts at regular intervals throughout the day, rather than sporadically. Back in 1882, General Sheridan and his men actually used the geyser to wash their laundry."

"How on earth could they do that?" said France in disbelief, more that someone would actually attempt something like that than that it was possible.

"They just chucked their clothes down the hole when it was calm and waited for the water to eject everything. It also turned out that it could only be done with linen and cotton fabrics. Wool, apparently, doesn't agree with Old Faithful and gets ripped to bits."

"Reminds me a bit of my own local laundromat," said England.

To hot springs...

"This is the Grand Prismatic Spring," said Wyoming. "It is the largest hot spring in the United States and third-largest worldwide."

The nations looked very impressed by the vibrant array of colors in and around the steaming water.

"I strongly urge everyone to be cautious around here and any other geothermal features in Yellowstone," the state continued. "While it may be beautiful, the water reaches temperatures of one-hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit. That's seventy degrees Celsius for you out-of-towners. And many of the other sites get even hotter. In other words, don't go jumping into the darn things."

Germany managed to grab Italy and Romano, who had been steadily disrobing and preparing to dive into the enticing water while Wyoming was talking.

And even to volcanos...

"This is the Yellowstone Caldera," said Wyoming. "It is an active supervolcano which could erupt at any moment and doom everyone to a horrible, brutal, fiery demise."

"Fascinating," Japan said, taking numerous pictures in rapid succession.

"Ve~ Germany, I don't want to die in horrible, brutal fire," Veneziano cried, clinging to his friend.

"Don't worry," Wyoming said with a smile. "The last eruption was over six-hundred-thousand years ago. So our impending doom is likely not going to come for a while."
It was actually one of the most peaceful G7 meetings ever held. Fresh air, decent food, a relaxed work environment, and sightseeing opportunities do wonders for reducing stress levels among strong-minded and sometimes willfully-antagonistic people.

The only person who had any complaints was Canada. It seemed that Canada had confused Wyoming with Colorado, as many people unfortunately did, and attempted to light up a joint one evening. Wyoming had screamed in outrage, snatched the joint from his uncle's hands, stomped on it repeatedly while cursing it to the deepest pit of Hell, and shouted that he wasn't his "fucking liberal Greenie sister who has to taint the world by legalizing that disgusting drug because, clearly, old-fashioned oxygen isn't 'good enough' for her."

However, all good things must come to an end and the week-long conference was over. The G7 nations once again collected their things and headed off to the airport where North Carolina had returned with the plane. Before they got on, though, Wyoming was insistent that he figure out where he and Germany had met.

"I just know I've seen you before," the boy said for the millionth time.

"And I say you haven't," Germany snapped. "Cease with your persistent bothering of me about it."

"Germany!" Italy called out as he hurried over to them. "Hey, Germany! I need some help! America gave me this form that I need to sign, but some of the words are long and confusing and I don't know what they are."

"Ja, fine. Hand it over." Germany took the form from Italy and squinted a bit at the small print. He then pulled some reading glasses out of his pocket and saw that it was a waiver concerning any injuries possibly sustained during the visit to Yellowstone.

Before Germany could explain it to his friend, however, Wyoming gasped as he took in Germany's appearance with the addition of the glasses.

"Wait a minute!" Wyoming exclaimed. "Now I know who you are! You're the guy who stole Ohio's porn mags back in World War II!"

Germany slapped a hand to his reddening face.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: North Carolina played a significant role in WWII. Not only did it provide numerous soldiers and medical staff who showed distinguished service and the state, itself, had to repel various naval attacks by the Germans, it was also the site of several POW camps (some of the camps, such as Camp Butner, helped to reveal the truth to German POWs about the evils of the Nazi regime by showing footage of the liberation of concentration camp victims). I knew I wanted at least some of the states to have met other nations before and this just came into my head.

Quel dommage – French for "what a pity."
"Tetons" apparently has a rather dirty meaning in French.

I decided that the guy who almost caught Germany and Prussia on their undercover
spying in the American camp during WWII is Wyoming (I saw the scene in the English
dub of the Anime and just had to find a way to reference it). I was originally going in a
different direction, but I thought my initial character design wasn't interesting enough.
So I figured, why not have one of the background 'human' characters turn out to be a
state?

Wyoming has a special place in my heart. It was the first place I went on a serious
vacation to since I was a child (the first place I traveled to other than my neighboring
states and my grandparents' house in Arkansas was Florida to go to Disneyworld). I
stayed at a dude-ranch and rode horses (I never wore a riding helmet, just my cowgirl
hat, and no one batted an eye) and saw a rodeo and witnessed the absolutely stunning
beauty of Yellowstone; we even got to spend a couple days in Jackson, which is a
wonderful little town (and, I swear, the Jackson Hole Airport looks more like a ski resort
than an airport). And there is just something about the air up in those mountains that
makes you feel healthier just by breathing it. According to my dad, Wyoming was also
where my uncle wanted to move out to before he was killed in Vietnam.
Also, Wyoming was the first state to give women the vote (granted, he wasn't a state
when he did it, but still). So, yeah, he's awesome.

The G7/G8 meets about once a year and almost never in the same place. The first place
the U.S. ever hosted a meeting was in Puerto Rico. The G7 meeting is actually not
going to be held in the U.S. again until 2020 (this year, 2018, it was held in La Malbaie,
Quebec, Canada), but here's to some creative license (let's just consider this one an
informal G7 session). Technically, Poland and Luxembourg should also be present in
this chapter, as the current EU representatives to the G7 are from those countries; it just
didn't occur to me until after I'd written most of the chapter.

Most people seem to forget that the bison is America's national mammal, because our
patriotic imagery is dominated by our national bird, the bald eagle. It is also the state
mammal of Wyoming (it's even on their flag). And it is 'bison' not 'buffalo.' People
mistakenly referred to bison as 'buffalo' because of some similarities of appearance, but
buffalo actually come from Africa and Asia.

Wyomingites do not like Coloradans. They call them 'Greenies' because of their license
plates, but I think it may have taken on another connotation considering Colorado
legalized recreational smoking of marijuana. Canada also has legalized marijuana.

I also think Wyoming likes his big brother Ohio a lot because it was Representative
James Mitchell Ashley of Ohio who introduced the bill to grant the Wyoming territory a
government, paving the way for it to eventually become a state. Wyoming is also named
after Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania.
"Ah, c'mahn, Shahnessy. Do we really need tah go through this ahgain?"

"Believe me, boyo, I'd like nothin' more'n for you to never have to darken my station's doors ever again. Unfortunately for me, you don't ever learn."

"Well, I'm better'n Yohrk was aht my age. Yuh know I'm only like this because'uh him."

"Yah, whatever. Tell it to your da when he gets here."

"C'mahn, Shahnessy. I can get yuh a good deal on some top-quahlity shoes."

"Oh, so it's bribes you're offerin', is it? More'n my job's worth t'take you up on that, boyo, even if I wanted to. Which I don't."

The burly, Irish-American police officer and the handcuffed teenager were waiting at the O'Hare International Airport just outside the exit for the terminal that was specifically reserved for the Jones family. Soon enough, the small private jet pulled in and America and his colleagues began to exit the craft.

When America and the other G7s arrived, they were met by the unusual sight of a middle-aged policeman with greying black hair and piercing blue eyes standing beside a sulking teenage boy. The boy was lean and fair-skinned; his eyes were a rather striking shade of emerald green and his long, thick brown hair was combed back, save for an odd little frayed strand of hair that stuck out from the side. The boy was also dressed in a crisp black suit and a black fedora. Despite his situation, the boy was smiling in the way that only an American from the Midwest can.

America, himself, was not as cheerful. In fact, his brow was furrowed in agitation and his mouth set into a hard line.

"Illinois!" he said with unusual sharpness.

"'Ey, Dad," said the teen in a slightly nasal accent. "Have a nice flight?"

"What have you done this time? No, don't even answer. It involved shady, backhanded business deals, again, didn't it?" America turned to the officer. "Officer Shaughnessy, what's he done now?"

"We caught him defacin' posters and billboards," said the policeman. "Painted moustaches on every face in every advertisement he could find."

"That's it?" said America, clearly confused that his son could only have committed a few simple acts of vandalism.
"Oh, and he was fencin' stolen goods. And t'ere was a spot o' trouble wit' some lads from the Outfit. And...well, you get the picture."

"Alphonse Jones, don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Uh...no?" Illinois said, completely nonplussed.

Officer Shaughnessy gave him a swat to the backside with his police baton.

"Ah, jeez, what's the big deahl, anyway?"

"We have laws for a reason, Alphonse," said America.

"Lahws are for people who don't have ahmbition othher than tah drive a fuckin' trahctor everywhere. Like Michigann. Or Indiahn. Or thaht asshat Ohio."

"This is the last straw, Alphonse. I've put up with this for too long. It's time you face the music."

"What're yuh gonna do, Dad?" Illinois' smile was infuriatingly smug. "Yuh've got nothin' thaht can get tah me."

America narrowed his eyes. Illinois had been getting himself into trouble for decades now. He used to be rather calm and quiet when he was little, but his wild and rebellious side took off in and around the 1920s, due to all the organized crime, and was only fed by some of the incredibly sleazy people that usually got elected to office in Chicago. Despite being considered the "Land of Lincoln," Illinois turned out to be surprisingly shifty and unscrupulous.

Disciplining him was often a problem for America, not just because America hated having to punish his kids but because Illinois just seemed to take whatever he was dealt and then went right back to his bad habits. It wasn't like he could use the embarrassing baby pictures trick or suspend cellphone privileges; Illinois just couldn't get flustered and he wasn't glued to his electronic devices like some of his siblings.

No. There was only one option left. It was a harsh and, some might say, inhumane punishment, and it tormented America that he would have to do it. But it was the only way to finally teach Illinois that he couldn't just do whatever he wanted.

"Gimme five minutes," America said solemnly.

The other nations watched in curiosity as America strolled over to a conveniently-placed hotdog vendor's booth. It was Chicago, after all, so of course there would be a hotdog place at the airport. America seemed to be having a small argument with the vendor, who looked absolutely horrified about something but grudgingly acquiesced. After picking up what he'd ordered, America strolled back over to face his son and held up a hotdog on a bun.

"Yuh bought me lunch?" Illinois said with a hint of derisive amusement. "Gee, thahnks, Dad, but yuh fohtrgot the muhstard and relish and everything."

America said nothing. He stared Illinois down and slowly, with his other hand, held up a bright red bottle. A bottle labeled "Ketchup."

The reaction was immediate. Illinois began thrashing as Officer Shaughnessy restrained him. A slew of absolutely venomous Polish curses came pouring from the state's lips. Occasionally seasoned with some Lithuanian. The boy seemed to be a mixture of enraged and terrified, and turned a sickly shade of green when his father went ahead and added the ketchup to the hotdog.
"No way," said Illinois. "I'm not doing it!"

"I'm sorry, Alphonse," said America sadly. "But you broke the law and you need to learn your lesson."

"Fuck you!"

A crowd of passersby stopped to stare at the spectacle. It was easy to tell which of the people were from out of town, because they didn't seem to understand what the big deal was, while all the local Chicagoleans (and even people from other parts of Illinois) were watching the scene as if their state was being murdered right in front of them. A couple of Catholic nuns in the crowd crossed themselves and grown men started to cry. Chicago families would later use what they witnessed that day as a cautionary tale for their children about the importance of obeying the law.

"I'm sorry," America repeated. "But actions have consequences, kiddo. This hurts me more than it hurts you."

"That's fucking bzdura! Keep that fucking piece of shit away from me! I call brutalilty!"

"I'd love to let you off the hook, Alphonse. But nothing else I've tried has made a difference."

There was a kind of strangely hypnotizing quality about watching America force his son to eat that ketchup-tainted hotdog. It had the disturbing aspects of a video showing CIA operatives waterboarding a suspect combined with the humorous nature of a home video of a baby who didn't want to eat his vegetables. It left the onlookers with an unpleasant feeling in their stomachs but they just couldn't turn away as the teenage boy seemed to go into nervous shock from what he'd just eaten. There was something about it that was kind of like the reaction one expected from Romano when faced with having nothing to eat but potatoes.

The end result was that Illinois, after having consumed the hotdog, began frothing at the mouth and descending into near catatonia.

"Don't ever give me a reason to do that again, Illinois," America said with a somber finality to his tone.

Illinois just gave a gurgle in response.

"I'll...I'll see the boy home t'en," said Shaughnessy, who was looking a bit disturbed, himself.

"Thank you," said America. "Make sure he has some Pepto Bismol. I couldn't live with myself if he suffers more than he has to. I hope he's learned his lesson from this."

"I don't t'ink he's ever goin'a forget this one, Alfred. I doubt I'll be bringin' him in to the station again anytime soon."

Officer Shaughnessy led Illinois away and America lowered his head in shame. It had to be done. It broke his heart to have to do it, but rules had to be obeyed and you couldn't curb misbehavior by being your child's friend. A parent must always be a parent for the sake of their children. America gave a short sigh and turned back to face the gawking nations.

"I'm sorry you guys had to see that," America said. "Not the type of thing a dad wants to do, but..."

Canada put a hand on America's shoulder and offered him a comforting smile.

"It's all right, Al," he said softly. "I had to do something similar when Quebec had that really bad
"Oh, I remember that," said America. "Wasn't that when you made him eat lunch with British Columbia and let Ontario hug him?"

"I gave him a choice, eh. Either he did that or he wouldn't be allowed any poutine for a month."

"Yeesh, you can be real tough when you want to be, huh, bro?"

"What the bloody hell was that?" England said flatly.

"Huh?" said America. "I was teaching my son an important life lesson. You break the rules, you get punished."

"All you did was make him eat a hotdog with ketchup on it."

"I know. I feel terrible, as it is. Please don't make me think about it."

"You did the right thing," said Canada, patting his brother's shoulder.

"That's not discipline, you imbeciles!" England snapped.

"Of course it is," Romano said with a frown. "Ketchup is a harsh punishment for any true lover of tomatoes. America, your son must truly have crossed the line to deserve that."

"Ve~ I think I'm going to be sick," said Veneziano, swaying slightly on his feet. "Germany, I need pasta to make me forget what we just saw."

"Ja, fine," Germany said with a resigned sigh. He honestly didn't understand what the problem was, but the absolutely visceral reaction from the state was all the proof he needed that boy had a serious aversion to the condiment. The Italy brothers' responses were fairly self-explanatory.

"Well, goodbye, guys, I hope you all have safe flights home," America said. "I'll see you at the next world conference."

"Illinois, how you doing in there, kiddo?" America said as he knocked on Illinois' bedroom door.

"Let me die," came the pained answer.

"Do you need me to call Minnesota in to give you some medical treatment?"

"Hahven't yuh punished me enough?"

America just shook his head and went back out to the living room. Illinois kept an apartment in the city, which was where the two of them were at the moment. Of course, that was only for when his son was actually in Chicago. In fact, Illinois spent most of his time in other parts of the state. He even still kept the old farm down south; it was where Illinois and Kentucky often hung out together when they didn't want their siblings nosing into their business (America also suspected it was where they hid the illegal still he was certain they'd built back in the 1920s and hadn't gotten rid of).

America took a seat on the couch and got out his laptop. Opening his e-mail, he wasn't surprised to see he'd been inundated with messages from the rest of his kids.

Maryland was prepping for her Renaissance fair and wanted him to help her put together her armor for the joust.
Massachusetts and Connecticut had gotten into an argument about whether Harvard or Yale was the university which had the most impact on American history and wanted him to settle it.

Texas sent him a rant about gay marriage being immoral and then threw in a few jabs about California and something about guns and dynamite being the answer to all life's problems. She also included a picture of herself, her half-brother Nuevo León, and her cousin Alberta at some kind of event for oil tycoons and weapons manufacturers they had all attended the other day.

Michigan and Indiana sent him their suggestions on plans for Christmas.

Mississippi wanted to know if he was coming to the epic musical showdown between her and Tennessee. The two girls were determined to prove who the real queen of American music was.

New Mexico sent him schematics to an ultra-classified nuclear weapon design, despite America having repeatedly told him that you don't send classified documents via personal e-mail.

Alaska asked him for a puppy.

All in all, it was the usual state of affairs for America. He pulled up his calendar and his work schedule and began writing up his replies.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Please don't kill me if I didn't get the accent right for Illinois. I looked up what I could about both the regional Midwestern accent and the Chicago accent, and this is how I think it looks shown in print. Just a lot of extra h's after certain vowels to stress the nasal intonations. Please correct me if I got it wrong.

Chicago is often stereotypically associated with crime and gangsters because of Al Capone (who was actually from New York); the Italian mafia operating out of Chicago, which was once led by Capone, is known as "The Chicago Outfit" or just "The Outfit." Chicago is also known for its exceptionally corrupt politicians; in fact, it's sometimes joked about that they don't need term limits in Chicago because it's just a matter of waiting for the arrest.

That being said, the rest of Illinois, like much of the Midwest, is generally made up of decent, friendly, hard-working folks. In fact, the south of Illinois has often been likened to Kentucky.

If you're trying to picture Illinois's outfit, think Blues Brothers. Illinois also usually wears the sunglasses, but he just didn't in this scene.

Illinois is referred to as the "Land of Lincoln" because it was where President Abraham Lincoln got his political start and was the state in which he had been living when he was elected president.

In Chicago, putting ketchup on a hotdog is tantamount to sacrilege and might as well be considered illegal by local consensus, even if not by law. I can sympathize with that. I hate ketchup, too.

Bzdura – Polish equivalent of "bullshit."
Illinois has a very well-known Polish population; it is second-largest in the country, right behind New York. It also has the largest Lithuanian population in the U.S.

I think Minnesota would be one of the most medically-trained of the states considering the medical advancements made in her state. She was where the Mayo clinic was founded and where the first heart transplant was performed.

Texas getting pissed off about gay marriage is because Texas is pretty much the opposite end of the political spectrum from California.
Virginia was not dressed in her normal, prudish, schoolteacher-like clothes. She was, instead, wearing a black pencil skirt with a black tie, jacket, and heels and a starched white shirt. She was also wearing an earpiece and dark sunglasses. Under her arm, she held an unmarked folder.

The heels of her shoes clicked faintly on the floor tiles as she walked, glancing around at her surroundings discreetly every now and again. Her cold grey eyes seemed to flicker with disdain behind her sunglasses.

She finally made her way into a small conference room. It was dark, save for the low lights on the long table at the center of the room. All along the table were people whose faces were hidden by the darkness.

"Ah, Miss Virginia, we've been waiting for you," said the shadowy figure at the head of the table.

"My apologies for the delay, sir," Virginia responded. "I was unavoidably detained by my partner."

Virginia tried to keep back the note of disapproval in her voice. As much as she cared about Maryland, her sister was far too happy and sweet for her own good, especially for as demanding and dangerous a job as they had. It was worrying enough in open combat situations, but to be so unassailably cheerful when one engaged in intelligence operations was highly disconcerting. There was a time and place for being in a good mood.

"Well, we are all eager for your report on the Saudi situation."

"Yes, sir."

Virginia slid the folder down the table to her boss. She repeated her information in an almost robotic fashion and held herself perfectly still and composed. It had become her habit in tense situations. She'd had to learn to shut out anything that might interfere with the effective completion of her work. While she was not always the stiff, humorless figure she presented, she no longer wore her heart on her sleeve. There was once a point in her life when she would preach her thoughts and beliefs to the high heavens, not caring who heard or what people thought, but time and suffering and war change a person. If she showed weakness, it only gave others fuel to hurt her or her family.

She was just finishing up her report when the door was flung wide. The other men and women at the table ducked out of sight as light came blaring into the room, accompanied by a smiling Maryland.

"Ginny!" she exclaimed. "Are you done with your boring meeting, yet?"

"Maryland!" Virginia snapped. "How many times have I told you not to come barging into debriefing sessions?"
"Um…twenty-four?"

"It's all right, Miss Virginia," their boss's voice came from under the table. "You are free to go."

"Yay! C'mon, Ginny."

Virginia muttered something very unkind before she found Maryland dragging her away by the arm. Maryland was bouncing on her feet and prattling about getting some hushpuppies or going to the aquarium or something. And Maryland was supposed to be Virginia's older sister. Well, older in terms of statehood. As far as Virginia was concerned, she was technically the oldest of all America's children due to the simple fact that she was the first colony. Well, first of the Thirteen. *Florida* was the first colony; a fact which irritated Virginia, considerably.

"Hey, Ginny, let's go do something fun!"

"Fine. But we're doing something *I* want to do this time."

"Okay, Ginny."

"We're going to the theater again."

"Is it-?"

"It's *not* Hairspray."

"Aw."

"We're going to an opera."

"Awwww."

"And, for God's sake, Mary, I know you like jousting, but could you *please* change out of that suit of armor."

"Awwwwwwwww."

"My feet hurt. These shoes are too tight. Why did you have to park so far away from the theater?"

"Stop whining, Mary," Virginia said sharply.

"Ughhh."

"You know, for a former pirate, you certainly complain a lot."

"…My preferred hobbies from my childhood are no one's business, Ginny."

Virginia had to resist rolling her eyes. That was a habit of *West* Virginia's and there was no way in hell she was going to start imitating *her*. Instead, she pursed her lips and gently smoothed down the silvery fabric of her evening dress, all the while wishing that Maryland's attire was less…gaudy. Maryland had a bit of a tendency to dress only in clothes that contained her state colors of red, white, yellow, and black. That combination did not exactly do wonders for a formal dress.

"Hey, girls!"

The sisters turned and saw their father striding over to them, waving enthusiastically, before pulling
them both into one of his crushing hugs. Virginia was relieved that he had deigned to wear a suit for their outing; it had been horribly embarrassing for her during the times he had decided to wear his normal, casual clothing to such formal occasions.

"Heya, Daddy," Maryland said cheerily. "Like my dress?"

"You look great, Mary."

Virginia winced slightly and hoped that he was just humoring her. She honestly didn't think she could take it if her father actually considered Maryland's dress to be tasteful.

"Oh, and guess who else came along," America said. He turned and the two girls followed his gaze to see New York standing nearby, along with that weird friend of his.


"Heya, Yorkie!" Maryland cheered and then yanked him into one of her own hugs. She then smiled at his friend. "Heya, Hong Kong!"

"Please, don't hug me," the administrative region said blankly.

"But I wanna hug you. Hugs make everything better."

"Tch, you sound like Taiwan."

"Mary, would ya quit buggin' my friend?" said New York.

"You guys are no fun," said Maryland.

"Whatever. What've we been dragged out here to see?"

"Street Scene," said Virginia.

"Oh, it's one of mine? Well, not really surprisin', is it?"

"You do kind of corner the market on musicals," Hong Kong added.

"It's an opera," Virginia said testily. "There is a difference."

"Okay, dudes," America interrupted, smiling widely. "We're all here to have a good time. Let's not fight."

"I'm not here to have a good time," said New York. "I came to destroy the confidence of Virginia's actors."

"And I'm, you know, helping him," said Hong Kong.

Sometimes, Virginia wondered why she even bothered to get up in the mornings.

Street Scene was perhaps one of the most underrated operas ever written. Virginia was certain it was because people do not often associate opera with the United States. Or it could have been because people thought the piece was a normal musical, as Hong Kong had.

It was a gritty, in-depth look at life in an early twentieth century tenement in New York. As much as Virginia detested her brother, she couldn't deny that he was incredibly creative (well, his people
were, anyway). She laughed, she cried, she had the tune of that song about ice cream cones stuck in her head. And during intermission, while Maryland was in the ladies' room and New York and Hong Kong were collaborating on their scathing review, Virginia took the chance to neutralize a target she knew would be at the performance that evening. After dosing the guy with a heavy sedative and leaving him tied up in a closet for the guys in the black van outside to pick up, she made her way back to her seat. For a moment, Virginia wondered if she might just be turning into a workaholic.

The others were already waiting for her when she got back.

"So," she said, taking her seat, "what do you all think of the show so far?"

"Well, I have never seen anything like this before," said Hong Kong.

"And, with any luck, we'll never see anythin' like it again," New York added.

The two boys kept their running commentary going into the second half of the opera.

"You know, I think I have found out what's, like, wrong with this show," Hong Kong said quietly.

"What?" whispered New York.

"It's the theater. The seats face the stage."

Virginia tried to shush them, but they didn't seem to care. Maryland and America didn't notice the altercation as they were focused on the performance. Even during the more emotional parts of the act, the troublemakers wouldn't let up.

"Well, that was a sweet number," said New York.

"Yeah," said Hong Kong.

"You know what else?"

"What?"

"I hate sweet numbers."

Virginia just tried to ignore them as the performance wound to a close. She had never wanted to leave a play so badly, before. Not because the work, itself, wasn't good but because she would probably snap if she had to hear one more insulting word from New York and Hong Kong about her actors. Of course, New York always thought he was the best at anything to do with the arts (well, he would concede some merit to California, but it was only grudging) and he made no secret of his total disregard for the talents of his siblings.

If he weren't her brother, she'd have made arrangements for her friends in the black van to pick him up for a little chat, too.

At least when the curtain call came, New York and Hong Kong had the decency to clap for the actors. Though Virginia detected a sarcastic quality to the action.

"You know, there's nothin' like a grand, old opera," said New York.

"Yes, and that was nothing like it," Hong Kong added.

Now, it is never a good idea to anger a Southern lady. Especially a Southern lady with a vast array of
connections and information at her disposal.

All right, so her father had given the boys a dressing-down for their behavior, but that was no guarantee that they wouldn't do it again. That was why Virginia was currently in one of the unmarked black vans, tailing her brother and his friend in order to find something she could use to get her revenge on them for their unforgivably discourteous comments at the theater.

"Miss Virginia," said one of the agents in the van. "Are you certain this in an appropriate use of government resources?" Must be a new guy. The veteran staff never dared to question her.

"That depends," she said. "Is sending you on a suicide mission in order to stage a coup in a foreign country a better use of government resources? Because, if it is, I will tell the driver to take us straight back to Langley for the briefing."

Before the now pale-faced young agent could respond, Virginia's cellphone began to ring. The state took a deep breath and started muttering things she loved in order to keep from throwing the phone to the ground and stomping on it repeatedly.

"…romance novels…guns…money…" She glanced at the caller ID and, once again, had to resist the urge to throw the device.

*Oh, what does this idiot want?*

"This had better be good, Florida," she said as she answered the phone, turning it on speaker.

"Ah, *hola, mi hermana!*" came the chipper response.

Maryland was bad enough, but Florida took that happy-go-lucky act to a whole new level. Virginia hated it. She found it impossible to trust cheerful people. Cheerful people *always* had something planned.

"How are you doing, Rebecca?" he continued. "Cold enough for you up there?"

"It's only sixty-eight degrees," Virginia snapped. "You make it sound like I'm living in an icebox like one of those Yankees. Look, what do you want? I'm busy, right now."

"What? You don't have time to hear what your dear brother has to tell you?"

"Did you find another starfish you want to spend three hours describing to me? Or, maybe, you want to tell me all about how wonderful it is to go to Disneyworld every other day, for the millionth time?"

"Oh, *mi hermana*, that is why I like you. Always such a positive outlook on life."

Virginia was certain she was causing her phone to crack due to how hard she was gripping it.

"But, no, that is not why I called. I thought you might like to hear about the bit of news I have."

"Make it quick. I'm spying on New York."

"Oh, my apologies. I did not realize you were following the Yankee *pendejo*."

That was Florida's only redeeming feature, in Virginia's opinion. As idiotically cheerful as he was, at least he was still a Southern boy at heart and understood where his loyalties lay. She still didn't trust him worth a damn or like him in any way, shape, or form, though.

"I just thought you might want to know," Florida continued, "that I have uncovered our *padre*'s list
of upcoming meetings, as per your request."

"I never asked you to get that list."

"No, but I did," Maryland's voice chirped from the passenger seat of the van.

"Mary-Anne, why do you need Father's schedule?"

"You mean we're not keeping tabs on his trips abroad, anymore? I've been having people tail him to meetings ever since he came out of isolation."

"And you never thought to mention this before now?"

"You never thought to ask!"

Virginia pinched the bridge of her nose and silently went over her mental list of things she loved in order to calm down. ...Guns...fireworks...money...fancy gardens...eating ice cream and watching sappy movies...

"All right, fine," she said with a tired sigh. "What do you have on Father's schedule, Florida?"

"The next world meeting is just around the corner," he replied. "It is going to be in Paris, France. Father will stay there just long enough to get things finished, but he's noted that he intends to return quickly so he won't miss Halloween."

"Yes, Alaska would be most unhappy if she didn't get to go trick-or-treating with Father."

Everyone, including the human agents in the van, shuddered at the thought of an unhappy Alaska. Memories of knives, bombs, chainsaws, and unpleasant things being done with puppets came to mind.

"Exactly, mi hermana," said Florida, a faint tremor in his voice. "But Padre is not the only one going on the trip. A couple of the Deep South crowd are going. As are Arkansas and Missouri."

"Wait," said Maryland. "Isn't Arkansas part of the Deep South?"

"He wishes."

"If he's not, then neither are you, Florida," said Virginia.

"Of course I count as Deep South! I'm the most southern of the continental states!"

"Look, guys," said Maryland. "We can argue about this all day, but there are far more pressing issues, right now."

"I hate to admit it, but she's right," said Virginia. "It seems I shall have to delay my revenge on New York for the foreseeable future, as well. Let us all convene at headquarters in twenty-four hours. Florida, bring the most reliable of the states who are going on the trip."

"So, Louisiana and/or Missouri?"

"Yes."

"All right. See you soon. Adios, mi hermanas!"

"Bye, Florida!" said Maryland.
Virginia didn't respond. As she turned off her phone, her attention returned to the video monitors where New York and Hong Kong were shown to be sitting in a restaurant and enjoying their lunch.

*Consider yourself lucky, Yankee. You just got a reprieve. But I'll be back.*

"All right. See you soon. *Adios, mi hermanas!*"

"Bye, Florida!"

Florida smiled as he turned off his phone and then turn in his chair to look at the young woman standing behind the bar.

"Well, Ana," he said. "We should probably grab Missouri and get going."

"Ah, *oui, cher,*" she replied in a smooth, sly voice. "I am lookin' forward to dis trip. How about a drink for de road?"

"What have you got?"

She smirked at him and set a large, curvy glass on the bar table. It was filled with a concoction that was almost a sensual shade of pinkish-red.

"How 'bout a Hurricane?" she said.

"I would think we've both had more than enough of those, recently," said Florida.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Virginia is the headquarters of the CIA and several other intelligence agencies (the CIA's nickname is "The Company"). Maryland is headquarters to the NSA, which cooperates with the CIA as part of the Special Collection Service.

Maryland used to be a hotbed for pirate activity, especially around the time of the War of 1812.

I recently saw a production of "Street Scene" in Richmond, at the same theater where I saw "Lucia di Lammermoor." It's actually surprisingly good, though the ending leaves you kind of disappointed. There are some brilliant parts to the show. For instance, only in America can you have an opera with a number that revolves solely around the subject of ice cream (I swear this is real, look up Ice Cream Sextet from Street Scene).

I don't know why, but I got this idea in my head of New York and Hong Kong doing a Statler and Waldorf routine in a theater and I had to write it up.

For some reason, I've gotten the impression that a lot of states, mostly other southern states, dislike Florida. Not entirely sure why. No offense, Floridians, but that's just what I've heard. It's probably some kind of sports rivalry thing.

I don't know why I decided that Florida should be involved in Virginia and Maryland's
spy ring. Maybe because Florida has a number of important military bases and is also
the location of Cape Canaveral (where our space program operates), he's really good at
gathering intel. Also, who would ever suspect the home of Disneyworld as being a spy?

An important note for anyone outside the U.S.A. Never, ever, under any circumstances,
call a Southerner a "Yankee." I know it's common in some countries, specifically in the
British Isles, to refer to Americans as "Yankees" or "Yanks." You could probably get
away with calling a New Englander that (they'll look at you a little funny, but they won't
take offence), but people in the American south will consider it an insult. "Yankee" is
the term Southerners use for Northerners, and they usually mean it in a derogatory way
(in fact, it was common for a long time to say "damn Yankee" as if it were one word).

Also, I am so sorry for the rather tasteless joke at the end. It's just that I see Louisiana as
the type of person who can laugh off problems and make the best of everything (why
else would one of the signature drinks of New Orleans be called "Hurricane"), so her
making a hurricane joke with Florida is not meant to be mean, it's just a sign that she
believes things are going to get better, and Florida understands that.
"And you both understand how essential it is to stay on your guard at all times?" said Virginia.

"Ah, chérie, have I ever let you down, before?" Louisiana said in a silky voice, almost a purr.

"Ana, tone it down some," said Missouri. "You're scaring our dear Virginny."

He was right about that. Louisiana had always left Virginia feeling very uneasy. It always seemed that, no matter how pretty, or friendly, or talented, or charming Louisiana was, there was something dark lurking behind those sparkling eyes, as if she was just waiting for a moment of weakness to strike. To devour the very hearts and souls of those around her and bend them to her will.

Perhaps she was just being paranoid, but Virginia had made it a point to never, ever be left alone with Louisiana.

"I hope I didn't offend you, my darlin' sister," Louisiana said. Her smile had far too many teeth. She then rose from her chair and practically sashayed over so that she was standing right next to Virginia, leaning in far too close for the older state's liking. "You know how much I treasure your good opinion, ma sœur."

"Quite," Virginia said shortly. "I am trusting you both to comport yourselves in a respectable manner and to not arouse suspicion."

"Ah-hon-hon, Virginie, I have no intention of arousin' suspicion."

Virginia couldn't help but feel as though she was being verbally molested. Missouri and Florida just stood by smirking at her predicament while Maryland merely blinked in innocent confusion, any possible innuendo sailing right over her head.

"And don't let the other three do anything to cause our family any embarrassment," Virginia continued. "Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas are not exactly our national brain trust."

"Don't let them hear you say things like that, mi hermana," said Florida. "You know how...sensitive those three are."

"As sensitive as their trigger fingers," Missouri added with a grin.

No matter what else the other nations said about France, it couldn't be denied that he was a very good host. Even if he did tend to get a little too friendly at times. His conference center was a very fancy building that was quite pleasing to the eye and he always arranged for excellent refreshments to be served after the meetings.

The first day of the conference went rather well. England only tried to throttle France twice, so it definitely went better than expected. After the meeting concluded, the nations withdrew for drinks and political chit-chat.

As America was finishing a story about how he, Japan, and South Korea had once had a non-stop gaming session that had lasted four days straight, his phone went off. America had a habit of
assigning song ringtones to all his contacts so that he would always know who was calling him. The rich, steady melody of Fats Domino's "Walking to New Orleans" caused America to smile as he answered.

"Hey, there, Jazz Queen," he said. "Wait, the others are going where? The ballet? Yeah, that sounds like Missy. Well, tell them to be back at the hotel at a reasonable hour. Hm? Oh, sure you can come up. Yes, there's food. Yes, it's good. Okay, see you in a few, Ana."

"Amérique," said France, frowning suspiciously as he overhead the snippet of conversation, "who did you just invite up to the reception?"

"One of my daughters."

"Is she going to be insane like that Pennsylvania girl? Because I just had this room remodeled."

"Don't worry, Francey-pants. Ana's only troublesome if you do something to make her mad, like insult jazz music."

France looked doubtful, and a little confused, but didn't have the chance to think of a response before the door was flung open.

"Papa! I am here!" the new arrival announced.

She was exceedingly pretty. Not as poised and delicate as Georgia, but still very striking. Her light brown skin was smooth and had almost a faint glow to it. Her eyes were a crystal blue that seemed to have the slightest hint of silver. Her hair was soft and silky, tumbling down her shoulders in waves of midnight black. She was wearing a powder blue ladies' overcoat that went down to her knees, and one could just see the end of a white dress underneath. She was also wearing a white beret that had a pin shaped like a magnolia blossom affixed to it. Her arms were laden with shopping bags; oddly, though, only a few of the bags seemed to be from clothing stores, the rest appeared to be filled with fancy kitchen supplies.

She bounded across the room, shopping bags flying out behind her, and practically threw herself against America, kissing him on the cheek.

"Papa, I have passed such a good time, today," she said with a wide grin.

"That's great, Ana," said America. "Did you have any trouble with the security personnel?"

"Have I ever?" She gave a dazzling smile and a wink. "You know dat no one can say 'Non' to me."

"Ah, that's good, and I'm glad you've been enjoying yourself." America turned to France, who was clearly a bit dumbstruck. "Oh, France, this is my daughter."

"Loosiana," the girl said, her smile turning into more of a sly grin. "Known to my famille as 'Antoinette Francisca Jones.' It is a pleasure to meet you, cher."

Louisiana suddenly found herself pulled into a crushing hug. Like most Americans, Louisiana was not exactly comfortable with her personal space being violated by someone she didn't know. Well, not if she wasn't the one doing it to someone else.

"So beautiful and sweet and cultured," France practically sobbed as he held the rather mortified state.

"Um, Papa, why is dis strange man huggin' me?" Louisiana said to America.
"Well, Ana, your Uncle France is a bit...affectionate," America explained.

"I knew that the French remained strong in America," France said. "I could die from happiness, now."

"I say, 'go ahead,'" England said sharply as he approached, looking somewhat disdainful of the new turn of events. "Do us all a favor."

"You are just jealous," France retorted. "My former French territory still loves her heritage, while your former colonies despise you."

Louisiana looked at England for a moment and her eyes narrowed.

"Wait, I know you," she said to him. "You are dat bastard who tried to ransack my New Orleans when I was only a bébé." She pulled away from France, dropped her shopping bags, and withdrew a cutlass which she'd been hiding underneath her coat. "Taste my cold steel, bastard!"

England ran as the enraged state gave chase, barely dodging a slash from the girl's cutlass.

"Death to de British and dere Navy!" she screamed. "Revenge! Vivre, La Louisiane!"

France looked at America, silently asking him what was going on.

"Battle of New Orleans, 1814 through 1815," America explained. "Louisiana was only two years old, but she holds a bit of a grudge."

"A bit?" said France.

"DIE!" Louisiana yelled.

"Hey, after seeing how some of my other states reacted to England, are you really surprised?"

"I suppose it is understandable. But why is she so...? I mean, she was perfectly calm a minute ago."

"You do recall who you had to fight for control of the Louisiana Territory, don't you?"

They both looked across the room at Spain, who seemed to be watching the spectacle with undisguised delight. Even after hundreds of years, he was still a little bitter over his Armada and was more than happy that someone else shared a grudge against the British Navy. Spain then noticed America and France looking at him and came over.

"Hola," he said. "America, your daughter's skill with the sword is impressive."

"Thanks," America said with a smile. "Can't take the credit for teaching her, though. Much of it is all Louisiana."

"Louisiana, you say? That name sounds familiar."

"It should," France said, a little testily. He clearly wasn't pleased that the state which had inherited so much of his culture also shared ties to Spain. "You kept coming along and trying to take that precious territory from me."

"¿Qué? Oh, she's that territory." Spain looked back over and smiled as he saw Louisiana had backed England into a corner and seemed intent on finishing him off. "So adorable. Almost as cute as Romano was at that age."
America wasn't sure if Louisiana would appreciate the comparison. He also knew that England would be more ticked-off than usual if America didn't step in before Louisiana cut him up into tiny pieces and fed him to the pelicans.

"Okay, Ana, you've had your fun," America said as he approached his daughter. "Put the sword away."

"But, Papa!"

"Now, young lady. If you keep acting like this, I'll lock up your spice cabinet for the rest of the week."

"What?! You can't do dat, Papa! How will I live wit'out my spices?! Everyt'in' will taste bland! I'll die if dat happens!"

At America's stern look, Louisiana grudgingly tucked the sword back inside her coat, still glaring at England and muttering some Creole curses under her breath. America helped the very ruffled England back to his feet.

"Sorry about that, Iggy," said America.

"America, I swear that your bloody children are all out to get me," England said furiously.

"Honhonhon, having problems, Angleterre?" France laughed as he and Spain joined them.

"That crazy chit attacked me."

"I was just finishin' what Maman started," Louisiana said with a triumphant smirk.

America tensed and the other three nations looked at the two of them curiously.

"Your Maman?" said France. "So you are one of the children that America had with his mystery woman?"

"I don't know 'bout no 'mystery woman.' I mean, Maman and Papa were married for 'bout sixty years."

"Married?!" said England, turning to look at America in disbelief. "You were married?!"

"Ana," America said warningly. "I thought we all agreed not to bring her up, ever again."

Across the room, though she was out of earshot, Mexico sensed the conversation topic being discussed and her hand gripped her wineglass so tightly that cracks began to form. Her eyes narrowed and her blood pressure began to spike. It was bad enough that one of the bruja's spawn was in the room, but subconsciously knowing that the woman she hated most was being mentioned was playing hell with her temper.

"Oh, Papa," Louisiana said with a sad shake of her head. "You must really come to terms with it. It's been so hard on us not bein' able to talk 'bout her. I know you loved her and she loved you."

"That was a long time ago, Ana."

"What is this?" said France. "Our dear Amérique was in love?"

"Well, we all heard about Mexico," said Spain. He then gave America a sharp look. "Which, incidentally, I still want to talk to you about, amigo."
"Don't bring up dat homewrecker," Louisiana said angrily. "She was part of de reason why Maman and Papa fought."

"Your mother and I fought because of irreconcilable differences," said America.

"Dat's always your excuse. I remember when you were both so in love, you could hardly bear to be apart."

"Ana-"

"Amérique, please," France interrupted. "Ma petite Louisiane is talking." He smiled eagerly at Louisiana. "Just what is your stubborn papa hiding?"

"Oh, it was so romantic and tragic," Louisiana said with a dramatic sigh, her French side in full force. "Dey found each other t'rough Fate's guidin' hand, only to have deir passion ignite into a blazin' inferno of gunfire and cannon smoke dat ended with Maman dyin' in Papa's arms. So beautiful and so sad." Louisiana began to tear up. "Out on dat muddy field of Appomattox, where our glorious Sout'ern soldiers-"

"Ana, that is enough," America said in a very stern and final tone. "I don't want to hear one more word about your mother or the war. Just…no more. You can either stay and politely meet some of my friends, or you can go back to the hotel to wait for your brothers and sister. Either way, you are not to bring the subject up again."

Louisiana hung her head.

"Yes, Papa. I'm sorry, Papa."

"Look, I don't mean to snap," America said. "But you know how painful that subject is. I know you like to see the best in everything, Ana, but not everyone is ready to talk about it. Okay?"

Louisiana nodded. She then gave a small smile.

"If it's all right, Papa, I'd like to stay and meet some more people."

America smiled back, his mood doing a complete one-eighty. No matter what, he could never stay angry with his children.

"Sure thing, my little Jazz Queen," he said. He turned back to the others. "If you all don't mind, dudes, I'm going to show Louisiana around. Good evening."

America steered his daughter away to introduce her to some of his other friends, though very clearly keeping her far away from Mexico who, herself, appeared to have waves of hate radiating off her, leaving England, France, and Spain to watch in deep bewilderment. They had just witnessed a side of America they never knew existed and learned more about him than any of them ever expected.

That America had been married was shocking enough, but that he had clearly had his heart stomped on and was still in mourning over the loss of someone he loved was more than England, France, and Spain had ever believed possible. For how long had America been keeping such things bottled up inside?

One thing was certain, though. They had to find out the truth.

It wasn't stalking. It was keeping tabs on their adorable 'niece' who was reluctantly hiding a juicy secret about her father's romantic history.
France and Spain had teamed up to find out exactly what America was so determined to prevent everyone from knowing. They had purposefully excluded England, as he would more than likely only make Louisiana angry again (and, as hilarious as that was, it was not helpful to their mission). England simply said he was going to do his own investigating, which meant he was going to take America out for drinks to try and elicit a drunken confession – which would backfire colossally when England became the one to get shit-faced rather than America.

Besides, France and Spain wanted to get to know Louisiana as a matter of course, rather than just because they were fishing for information.

They found her talking with another teenage girl and boy. Considering how close the three seemed to be, France and Spain assumed they must have been her siblings.

The new girl was dark-skinned, more so than Louisiana. Her black hair was done in long, thin braids that framed a sweet, round face, and she also wore a silver hairclip shaped like what appeared to be a pair of crossed pistols. Her eyes were brown and had a mischievous glint to them. Unlike Louisiana, she wasn't as dressed up, preferring jeans, a red t-shirt, and a rather worn grey jacket.

The boy looked to be more indeterminate in regards to ethnicity. His complexion was somewhat comparable to Spain's, though maybe a shade or two darker. His long hair was brown and messy and pulled back in a low ponytail. His eyes were a bright silver grey and held a sharpness to them that indicated he was more aware of what was going on than his easygoing demeanor suggested. He also had slightly thick eyebrows; though, thankfully, nowhere near as bad as those of England. He was dressed in a very tidy, white suit with a red necktie.

"Ma belle Louisiane," France exclaimed cheerfully, drawing the children's attention. "How lovely to see you again."

"Oh, hello dere, Uncle France, sir," Louisiana said, giving him a bright smile. "I di'n't expect to see you here. Don't all ya'll nations have a meetin' today?"

"It is informal business today. Mostly those discussing personal interests rather than world matters. And I was so desolate that I could not get to know you better before your papa dragged you away." He smiled at the other two. "But, who are your charming companions?"

Louisiana blushed a bit. She may have a lot of French blood, but a proper Southern lady was required to be coy in the face of such open familiarity from a man, even if she enjoyed the attention. Just as her dear maman taught her. The same rule did not apply when teasing her stuffy sister Virginia; if Louisiana didn't know better, she'd think that Virginia was taking her seriously. It was probably due to her English blood.

"Ah'm Mississippi, sir," said the girl with the braids. "Meredith Jones. It's a pleasure to make yer acquaintance."

"And I'm, I say, I'm Alabama, sir," said the boy. "Owen Jones. And, likewise, sir."

"Ha, you know dern well that 'Owen' ain't yer first name," Mississippi said with a wry look at her brother.

Alabama's face reddened a bit in embarrassment.

"Fine, I say, fine," he grumbled. "Ambroise Owen Jones."

"Oh, such a delight to meet you both," France cooed. "Très bien. I am your dear Uncle France. And this is my friend Monsieur Spain."
"Hola," Spain said pleasantly. "Miss Louisiana, I am sorry I did not get to meet you properly, last night. I wanted to compliment you on your swordsmanship. Fue muy bueno."

"Oh, gracias, Señor," said Louisiana. Her accent was somewhat odd when speaking Spanish. And what little French she had previously been heard to speak had a very archaic quality to it, as if she were speaking in an eighteenth-century dialect.

"You got inna fight, Ana?" said Mississippi.

"Didja, I say, didja win?" said Alabama.

Louisiana puffed up in pride.

"I ain't de goddaughter of Jean Lafitte fer not'in'," she said.

"Oh, sí," said Spain. "Ella era magnífica."

Louisiana blushed again, causing Mississippi to giggle and Alabama to give an amused snort.

"So, have three wonderful young people such as yourselves been enjoying my beautiful city?" said France.

"Oh, yes, sir," said Mississippi eagerly. "Last night we went to de ballet. 'Course, Arkansas and Missouri sulked and complained 'bout it."

"But we all know they secretly loved it," said Alabama in a conspiratorial stage-whisper. "They're just too proud to admit they like 'girly' thangs. I say, those suckers like to rib on me all the time fer bein' as cultured as I is. They 'rib' me so much, one would think they have a 'bone' to pick. Get it? 'Rib.' 'Bone.' That's a joke, sir. Just a lil' somethin' we have where I come from."

"There is nothing wrong with loving the beauty and refinement of the ballet," said France, a bit defensively. "And you should tell these 'Arkansas and Missouri' that there are plenty of big, masculine nations that adore the ballet."

Alabama and Mississippi exchanged subtle looks, as though wondering if the somewhat flashy European country was going to include himself in the category of 'big, masculine' nations. If he did, they would have a hard time restraining themselves, as they would be compelled to fall to the ground laughing.

But France just grinned.

"Did you know that Monsieur Russia is as much of a ballet lover as I am?"

"What?" the three states all said together in disbelief.

"Ya mean de Comm-er, de feller dat's always causin' Pa so much trouble?" said Mississippi.

"Pa's complained about that…person for years," said Alabama. "And too right. Too right, I say. I don't trust no one…I say, I don't trust no one who lives that far north."

"Ah mean, ah knew dat de Ruskies made a lot of ballets, but dat Pa's own archenemy is a ballet lover…ah can't wait to shove dat in Ark and 'Sourra's faces."

"So," France continued, "what are you three angels doing today?"

"Just brushin' up on some family history," said Alabama. "I say, Pa likes to talk about his Revolution
days, so we wanted to see where the Treaty o’ Paris was signed."

"Oh, bon! That was such a glorious day. Your dear Papa was so happy when he won his independence. I must say, it was a great relief to have all that fighting done with."

"I still think we should have kept the war going," said Spain wistfully. "A few more months and I would have had Gibraltar."

"What does Gibraltar have to do with anyt'in'?" said Louisiana.

"Oh, we were fighting England in other places to distract him while your father was taking on British forces back at his home. France and I set up a siege of Gibraltar, but the war ended before we could get control of it."

"But you wanted to see where the treaty was signed?" said France. "Come, come, I remember the place distinctly, I will show you."

Louisiana followed eagerly after France and Spain, while Mississippi and Alabama walked at a more sedate pace. While they didn't suspect their 'uncles' would do anything bad, they were not always particularly trusting of people they hadn't met before. Of course, if France or Spain did try anything unsavory, all three states were armed to the teeth (customs regulations be damned, they were Americans, goshdarnit!).

Thankfully, it was not a long walk to the site. France led them to 56 Rue Jacob, where a tasteful, white building stood. On the building was a simple placard that read:

\[\text{En ce bâtiment, jadis Hôtel d'York, le 3 Septembre 1783 David Hartly, au nom du Roi d'Angleterre, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, John Adams, au nom de Etats-Unis d'Amerique, ont signé le Traité Définitif de Paix reconnaissant l'indépendance des Etats-Unis.}\]

France was rather pleased to note that all three of the states seemed to have no trouble reading the inscription.

"Ah wish ah'd been dere to see it," said Mississippi, taking a quick snapshot with her camera. "Pa always gets real nostalgic when he remembers dat day."

"So, shouldn't, I say, shouldn't September 3rd be Pa's actual birthday instead of the 4th o' July?" said Alabama.

"Stop overt'inkin' it, 'Bama," said Louisiana. "Papa was already independent wit' de Declaration, dis was just him gettin' that England fella to recognize it and get his dag-gummed redcoats off Pa's land."

"Not dat dat stopped de dang Brit from comin' back," said Mississippi.

"Yeah, but, I say, Ma and Pa beat him up pretty good the next time he showed his stupid face," said Alabama.

Louisiana shot him a look and elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

"Hey, 'member what I told you Papa said last night," she said, a little bitterly. "We ain't s'posed to talk 'bout Maman."

"Oops, sorry, Ana. I say, sorry, Ana."

France and Spain shared a quick glance. Just the opening they'd been waiting for.
"I apologize if this seems rude," said Spain, "but why doesn't your papa like to talk about your mama?"

The states all looked at the ground and shuffled their feet awkwardly.

"Ah ain't sayin' nothin'," said Mississippi. "Pa would get madder dan a mosquito in a mannequin factory, I tell you what."

"I ain't disobeyin' Papa after how upset he was last night," said Louisiana. "Torture me, kill me, not one word of de matter shall cross my lips, again."

They both looked at Alabama, as if expecting him to be the one to do the big reveal. Alabama, however, simply made the sealed-lip gesture, much to the others' obvious frustration. Clearly, the states wanted to talk about their mother, but they were all too terrified of crossing their father. It was so strange that anyone should be so intimidated by America, of all people, but, after the recent revelations, France and Spain realized they did not know America as well as they thought.

"Very well," said France, a sly grin crossing his face, "then let us turn to more cheerful matters. I would be more than happy to give you three a tour of my beautiful Paris. I know all the best restaurants and boutiques, and, as your doting uncle, I have decades' worth of presents to buy you."

The children's spirits immediately lifted.

"As we say back at my place," said Louisiana "Laissez les bon temps rouler."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So, we get a bit of a glimpse into America's personal life. He did go into isolation for a long time, so who knows what he got up to?

Louisiana's human name, Antoinette Francesca, is a reference to her two uncles, France and Spain. Spain's human name is "Antonio" and France's human name is "Francis." So, I did a feminized version of both their names in each other's languages.

"Laissez les bon temps rouler." – A phrase often associated with Louisiana and Mardi Gras. It means "Let the good times roll."
Fue muy bueno – "It was very good." Spanish.
Ella era magnífica – "She was magnificent." Spanish.

Louisiana French, or Colonial French, is different from standard French. It is derived in large part from the Acadian dialect, due to the number of Acadians who fled there from Canada after they were driven off their land by the British when they refused to renounce their loyalty to France.

Jean Lafitte was an infamous French pirate/privateer who operated out of Louisiana and was instrumental in helping the Americans drive the English out of New Orleans by providing his and his men's assistance on the condition that his brother, Pierre (also a pirate), be released from prison. My headcanon is that Louisiana's mother made Jean the godfather to her little girl in light of his service (and that Jean gave baby Louisiana a cutlass as a christening gift; because, hey, pirate).
Mississippi loves ballet in my fic (I know that it's not the state dance, but evidently there is a big, international ballet competition in Jackson). I sort of imagine her looking a little bit like Brandy Norwood, who was born in Mississippi, by the way. I got a bit of a girlcrush on Brandy when I was little when I saw her in Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Cinderella" (and, as far as I am concerned, she is the only live-action Cinderella the world will ever need). Mississippi's human name "Meredith" is a reference to James Meredith, a famous civil rights activist and the first African-American ever to be admitted to the University of Mississippi.

Alabama was originally supposed to be a girl (her name was "Camille"), but I realized a couple months ago that I had hardly any male southern states and decided to trade out a female state with a male state (I worked hard to ensure a 25/25 gender split). His first name, "Ambroise," is a French variant of Ambrosius which means "immortal." His second name, "Owen," is a reference to Jesse Owens and also, apparently, means "young warrior" or "noble/high-born" in Welsh. Alabama's speech pattern is based on that of the character of Beauregard Claghorn (upon whom the Looney Tune's character of Foghorn Leghorn was based).

Placard translation: "In this building, once Hotel of York, on September 3, 1783, David Hartly, in the name of the King of England, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, John Adams, in the name of the United States of America, signed the Definite Peace Treaty recognizing the independence of the United States."

Bet you all have a few questions. Like, what the hell was going on between America, Mexico, and the mysterious woman I have now revealed was once married to America? Why does Mexico seem to harbor a deep hatred for this woman, even to the point where she cannot stand the subconscious knowledge that someone is discussing her? I'm sure some history buffs have worked it out.
Mississippi was really enjoying herself.

While she wasn't exactly little miss girly-girl (that was a designation reserved for Georgia), she did enjoy being fussed over. Probably because people often overlooked her unless they were accusing her of being "uneducated," "backwards," or "racist" – which was completely unfair and nothing but Northern slander, in her opinion. At least she hadn't been declared unsafe for non-white tourists by the NAACP like Missouri had, last year; whatever else she thought about her little brother, no one deserved that kind of insult.

France and Spain, thankfully, didn't even seem to register that there was anything troubling about the states. They just saw a bunch of long-lost nieces and nephews to spoil. It was actually very different from what she had been expecting. Mississippi had listened very intently to the things her mother had said about European nations and not a lot of what had been said was complimentary.

Mississippi had chosen to reserve judgement on that, however, until she actually met any European nations. She hadn't had much of a chance to before now. She wasn't overly fond of travel and she had tended to serve as a home front during wars, as her father trusted her to know how to manage the resources and arrange important shipments to support the troops overseas. But, after meeting France and Spain, she had to admit she liked them a good deal.

And they seemed to like her…and Louisiana and Alabama, too, but that's as may be.

Of course, how could anyone not like her? – well, other than ignorant jerks who were envious of how fabulous she was. Louisiana liked to believe she was best, just because she was more well-known, but Mississippi knew who would come out on top if they stacked up accomplishments side-by-side. – She was an acclaimed musical genius. Sure, Louisiana had jazz and blues, but Mississippi had both of those, plus rock and roll, country, and gospel. She had brought forth poets and novelists and outsider artists and actors and that crazy guy who made the weird-looking pots.

So being in Paris was considerably pleasing to someone like Mississippi.

The only thing that was interfering with her enjoyment of the trip was the fact that Alabama insisted on reading things out to her. He hadn't done it that first day when they met France and Spain, but, after that, he would slowly translate written things for her (menus, signs, tourist pamphlets, etc.).

"…Well, I say, Missy, if you look right there," he said, pointing to a section of her menu as they had all gone out for lunch, "I say, it says-

"Oh, for God's sake, 'Bama, I know what it says," she snapped.
"Come now, Missy, let's not, I say, let's not fight. No need to get all worked up."

"You do it all de time, 'Bama. And ah'm gettin' real sick of it, ya hear?"

"I noticed it, as well," Spain added with a curious look at Alabama. "Is there a reason why you have been reading for your sister?"

Mississippi glared at Alabama, as if daring him to answer. He looked like he was about to, but Louisiana beat him to the punch.

"Oh, simple, cher," she said. "It's 'cause Missy can't read."

"Quoi?" said France, turning to look at the fuming Mississippi. "But you read the placard we showed you the other day."

"Don't listen to dem," Mississippi said, her face heating up in embarrassment. "Ah can read. It's just...ah can't read English."

The two countries stared at her in disbelief.

"Pardon?" said France.

"Ya'll heard what ah said. Ah can't read English. Never could. Ah can read French just fine. Heck, ah can even understand a bit of Chinese, of all thangs. But ah've never understood English."

"Oui," said Louisiana. "It is one of her li'l quirks."

"Hey, yer not much better, Ana. Half de time, you forget to even speak English, much less write in it."

"It's not dat I can't, I just choose not to," Louisiana said somewhat defensively.

"How is that possible?" said Spain. "I would have thought, as it is your father's language-"

"Who told you, I say, who told you that our father's language is English?" said Alabama with a frown.

"Well, no one, I just assumed..."

"Papa has no national language," said Louisiana. "He never did. He said it was considered by his Founding Fathers, once, but dey changed deir minds. It would be a bit too much like tryin' to declare a national religion. And Papa wasn't havin' none of dat, eit'er."

"Truly?" said France. "Angleterre always used to boast to us that the fact that he and your father share a language is proof that he is your father's closest ally."

It was true. England had frequently reminded the other European nations that America, the world's superpower, was an English-speaking country whom England had personally raised and he would constantly point out the significance of the Special Relationship. He never did so within earshot of America, but he wouldn't hesitate to say it to other countries.

Frankly, the other nations, France and Spain, especially, had been astounded by the fact that America's states had repeatedly shown that they could speak languages other than English. While it was known that America was a nation with people from many different places and cultures, most of the other countries had assumed that their people had simply become assimilated into a predominantly English-derived society.
"Oh, I say, that's nonsense, sir," said Alabama. "Why, our father told us that, as a child, his first European language was Spanish."

"Really?" said Spain, his eyes widening in shock.

"Yeah, and Italian from the Italian explorers what were in the employ of the Spanish Crown. After that, he got Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish. And then French and English and German."

"He even learned Hungarian and Polish when he got a bit older," said Mississippi. "All before his Revolution."

France and Spain shared a look. It seemed that America had not been as singularly close with England as the island nation liked everyone to believe. While they had no doubt that America was still somewhat fond of England, even after all the arguments and squabbles they had, America had been just as keen to form ties to other nations beyond what was merely necessary.

Among the nations, it was rare to know more than one or two other languages, as most nations had their own national language. In fact, among the Europeans, Switzerland had been considered something of an oddity for not only knowing French, German, Italian, and Romansh but having all four as his national languages. Nations didn't necessarily need to know each other's languages, either, as they all had something they referred to as 'Nation Speak' which allowed them to communicate with each other. To have a nation with multiple languages was normally a sign of multiple, distinct ethnic groups identifying with the same country.

However, for a nation to take the time to learn another's language when it was not strictly necessary to have more than one or two was basically unheard-of.

"Course, before all ya'll showed up, he only spoke the Native languages," said Alabama. "I say, he forgot most of them after a while, but he still remembers some."

"Dat's part of why he did so well at makin' codes durin' World War II, ah tell you what," said Mississippi. "It's 'cause he confused everyone wit' his Navajo talk."

When Mississippi mentioned that she was an artist, France insisted on taking her and her siblings to all the best art museums. While Louisiana and Alabama were interested for the first couple hours, they didn't possess Mississippi's almost obsessive determination to see every single thing in every single gallery in every single place they went. Mississippi naturally gravitated towards abstract and expressionist works, things that reimagined the world in sharp contrasts and vivid colors.

Of course, a slight snag emerged when the group entered a gallery of somewhat more realistic depictions of the human form. You see, there is a difference between what Americans and Europeans consider decent for general viewing.

Walking into the latest gallery on their tour, Mississippi took one glance at the works inside and froze as still as a nearby statue. Her eyes flew wide and she began to shake. And then she started screaming.

"Sacre bleu, what is wrong?!!" said France.

Louisiana and Alabama, both of whom had been startled by the artworks, too – though not to the same extent as their sister – immediately flanked Mississippi and steered her back out of the room, with Alabama shielding her eyes with his free hand. France and Spain followed the three teens, both incredibly confused about what could have triggered such a response from Mississippi. After moving back into the previous room, Mississippi curled into a ball in the corner and began to slowly rock.
back and forth.

"Dios mio, what has upset her so horribly?" said Spain.

Alabama gave him an incredulous look.

"You actually have to ask that?" he said, a mortified blush creeping into his face. "It was them, I say, it was them paintin's in that room."

"What is wrong with those paintings?" said France. "They are masterpieces."

"...They have naked people in them."

France and Spain just blinked at him as if they couldn't understand what he was trying to say.

"Oui," said France. "Quite a number of the great works of art contain nudity. I do not understand how that is a problem."

Louisiana and Alabama, both of whom were looking incredibly uneasy, spared a glance at Mississippi. She was still rocking and had begun to mutter inane, childlike things to herself. Louisiana turned back to the two nations and leaned in to whisper to them.

"Uh, Missy's never really been comfortable with anyt'in' to do wit' s-e-x," she said. "To be honest wit' ya, I ain't exactly keen on de subject, neither."

"Wait, what do you mean 'anything to do with sex'?" said Spain. "That art wasn't sexual."

"Dere were naked folks everywhere and you expect me to believe dat ain't not'in' to do wit'...I can't even say it, it's too indecent."

France and Spain had no idea how to respond to that. For them, nudity wasn't inherently a sexual thing, especially when it came to art. Both of them even had public beaches that permitted nudity. Most Europeans, in general, were fairly open-minded when it came to the human body, though everyone had different ideas of what was and was not appropriate. But for anyone to break down in a fit over seeing a few naked people in paintings and sculptures was not something any European would consider as even a remote possibility.

"If you and Alabama aren't screaming, then why is she?" said Spain with a nod at Mississippi.

"Dat's kinda an awkward story," Louisiana said, shifting on her feet with her gaze focused on the floor. "See, when she was li'l, she sorta walked in on..." She trailed off and, from the way she tensed, it was clear what she was trying to avoid saying.

Her father and mother. It was something the two nations had noticed during their time with the states. Any time one of them began to mention something connected to their mother, they would shut down or suddenly change the subject. And it wasn't difficult for the two very experienced European nations to pick up on what exactly Louisiana had been trying to say.

Mississippi managed to calm down once they got her some ice cream and turned on the playlist of Elvis songs on her ipod. Once she was back to normal, she acted like she hadn't completely freaked out in the middle of an art gallery over a few nude paintings. France and Spain both agreed that they would need to tread lightly the next time they took any of their nieces and nephews to museums, and they both agreed that they would need to have a little talk with America about what the hell he was thinking in raising his children to be so terrified of the human body.
Upon returning the three states to their hotel, the group was greeted by the sight of a table lamp crashing through an upstairs window, followed by an enraged Southern voice.

"And if ya don't shut up that darned fiddle-playin', I'm gonna reacquaint you with the end of my shotgun!"

"Ah, great," Alabama muttered. "I say, Arkansas's madder than a hornet in a coke can."

"Don't ya play innocent with me, Missoura," the angry boy upstairs continued. "I swear, I'll smash that stupid thing with a damn steam-roller if I hear it again...WHAT DID YOU SAY, YOU YANKEE-LOVIN' SELLOUT?!"

"Mon dieu, what kind of beast is that?" said France.

"Arkansas," the three states said together.

"He's always been a bit touched in de head," said Louisiana. "And he and Missouri have never gotten along."

"He ain't all bad," Alabama said. "He's a nice boy, but about as sharp as a bowlin' ball."

More crashing came from the room and Alabama rolled his eyes.

"Well, I best, I say, I best get up there and sort this out 'fore they kill each other," he said.

After making his way inside and taking the elevator up to their floor, Alabama walked right into the hotel suite to find his little brothers smashing their fists into each other's faces. Alabama plastered on his most charming smile and strolled up to them.

"I say," he said. "I say what's all the whoopin' and hollerin' about, boys? Stop, I say, stop that." He pushed the two apart and held them back at arm's length. "I swear, you boys are like taxes. You just don't know when to stop."

"It's the Yankee-lover's fault, Owen," said Arkansas. "All night and every night, I hear his blasted fiddle screechin'."

"It ain't my fault you got no appreciation for music," said Missouri. "What else can I expect from a toothless hick?"

"Oh, that's real rich comin' from a Yankee lickspittle."

"You boys have got mouths like cannons," said Alabama. "Always shootin' 'em off. 'Sourra, you go get some ice for that black eye."

"I don't have a black eye," said Missouri flatly.

"You want me to fix that?" Arkansas snarled.

Missouri figured it would be best to leave and quickly exited the room, slamming the door shut behind him. Alabama then leveled Arkansas with a stern look.

"What happened?" he said.

"It's just like I said," Arkansas replied. "He just won't pipe down."

"And that's worth wreckin' our hotel suite over? Pa's gettin' real tired of all the damages he's had to
"I'll cover the charge. That's more than what any of our sibs do when this happens. Ain't none of 'em understand takin' responsibility for their actions."

"And that's why, I say, that's why you chose to start smacking 'Sourra around?"

"No. I told ya I did that because of the fiddle."

"Now, listen – I say, listen here, boy," said Alabama, giving Arkansas a light smack upside the head. "You can't go 'round smacking your brother just because you don't like his fiddlin'. You need to act like a gentleman, boy. You gettin' this through that little, blonde head of yours?" He gave him another smack. "I say, pay attention when I'm talkin' to you. I'm not talkin' just to hear my head roar. You need to, I say, you need to stop causin' so much trouble, boy. Look at me, for instance. I'm a proper gentleman because our parents raised me right. I don't go throwin' lamps through windows and smacking my brothers for no reason." He smacked Arkansas upside the head again. "Are you gettin' this, boy?"

By this point, Arkansas had had enough. He glared at Alabama for three seconds and then socked him in the jaw before storming out of the room. Alabama swayed on the spot for a moment, reeling a little from the hit, but quickly shook himself back to reality.

"That boy's got more nerve than a bum tooth," he said to himself.

Once their uncles had left and the Deep South states had retired to their hotel suite, things were much calmer. They didn't know where Arkansas and Missouri had wandered off to, but, as long as they weren't doing any further damage to the hotel, they didn't particularly care.

Alabama had pulled out his copy of To Kill a Mockingbird and was reading quietly (he'd read the book about fifty times, but once more never hurt). Mississippi was carefully undoing her multitude of little braids so she could wash her hair properly that evening; the thick, black hair frizzed up with each strand she loosened. Louisiana, meanwhile, was rapidly texting their cousin Quebec. As per usual, they both texted only in French, which was something of a pain to do with an English-centric auto-correct.

"All that's missin', I say, all that's missin' is a hound dog curled up on the carpet and we'd be back at my house," said Alabama.

"Or mine," said Mississippi.

"Ha! Not likely. This place, I say, this place is ten times classier than that shack you live in."

"Better a shack on a rock dan a castle in de sand, 'Bama."

"Seriously, Missy, I wonder, I say, I wonder if you even have indoor plumbing in your house."

"Bless your heart, are you tryin'a get another punch in de jaw, Ambroise? 'Cause ah'd be more'n happy to oblige you."

"Ah-hon-hon," Louisiana chuckled. "You li'l children are so adorable."

"Quit callin' us 'children,' Ana."

"I may call you 'children' as much as I like. I am, after all, your big sister."
"Oh, Lawd, where's Georgia when you need her? You'd never get away wit' talkin' like dat if she was here."

"I say, we don't need Georgia," Alabama said a little too quickly. "We can sort out our problems amicably. No reason to go gettin' Georgia involved."

"Whatever, 'Bama." Mississippi stood up and stretched. "Ah'm goin' for a soak in de tub. Anyone bothers me or touches dat beer in de mini-fridge, I'll shoot 'em."

Her siblings immediately became thoroughly engrossed in their previous activities. Shortly after Mississippi retreated to the bathroom, Louisiana snickered at something Quebec sent her.

"What?" said Alabama.

"Quebec just sent me a funny," said Louisiana.

"I didn't, I say, I didn't even realize Quebec knew what 'funny' means."

"Look." She held up her phone that showed a picture of a chicken floating in a pool. "It's a swimmin' poule."

"…You know what, Ana? You remind me o' Paul Revere's ride. A little light in the belfry."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The Deep South states may be part French, but they are still Americans. And we Americans have never really handled the whole 'nudity' and 'sex' thing well. Most Americans (not everyone, but most) get very uncomfortable with anything remotely connected to sex (even non-sexual nudity), though Mississippi's reaction is little exaggerated (we're not likely to start screaming if we see a nude painting). Violence, on the other hand, is fine. In fact, give us lots and lots of violence, because we're mostly desensitized to it. But sex…no. Mississippi has some of the most old-fashioned sex education in the country. Most schools teach abstinence-only, so I think Mississippi might be tiny bit freaked out by sex. Louisiana might like to flirt and make innuendos, but she, too, isn't cool with nudity.

A lot of other states like to ridicule Mississippi. Alabama and Arkansas frequently say "we may be last at [fill in the blank] in the country, but at least we're not Mississippi." Education is frequently cited as one of Mississippi's failings (it is, according to studies, the least-educated state, with West Virginia second-least and Louisiana in third). I decided that the reason Mississippi has trouble reading is because she can't read English. She's fine with a number of other languages, but not English. Mississippi can read Chinese a little because she actually has a notable Chinese population (first wave of immigrants came as laborers and indentured servants in the 1870s and later parts of the 19th century, the second wave came between 1910 and 1930, and the population has been steadily increasing).

Mississippi was once one of the richest of the states (I believe it was 5th wealthiest in the country). And it was where some of America's greatest music genres were pioneered. It has been the home of dozens of incredibly creative and talented musicians (including
Elvis), writers (like Tennessee Williams), actors (like Oprah Winfrey, Jim Henson, and James Earl Jones), and even some innovative visual artists (such as George Ohr, who created abstract expressionist pottery).

For some reason, though, I rarely see Mississippi mentioned in state fics.

America has no national language. America has always been a multilingual nation. While English is used predominantly in modern times, there has never been a rule that says everyone has to know it. Considering how many different cultures have shaped America, is it really that hard to believe he knows a lot of languages? Also, yes, he would have known Hungarian and Polish before the Revolution because immigrants from those countries had been coming over since some of the earliest days of the colonies (in fact, some of the most dedicated Patriots in the Revolution were of Polish and Hungarian origins).

Arkansas and Missouri hating each other is something I wasn't aware of until recently. I was searching for info about state rivalries and someone from Missouri posted that they and fellow Missourians often verbally dump on Arkansans, usually by poking fun of the 'toothless hillbilly' stereotype.

I actually have family out in Arkansas (just outside Conway; I don't suppose I have any readers from out thataway, or do I?), but I've never really heard anything about state rivalry from them.

Terrible joke at the end that I found on the internet. I like to think Louisiana and Quebec send each other really stupid puns in French.
America wasn't at all surprised when he learned about all the time France and Spain were spending with Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. The two Europeans had always been fond of children, and those three Deep South states just happened to be blessed with that old Southern charm that drew others in. Well, as long as they were out in public; back home, the three could be a nightmare-inducing force of chaos. France and Spain were currently seeing the kids at their best; however, America laughed internally at the thought of how those two would react if they saw Alabama shooting beer cans off a fence because he was 'bored,' or Mississippi in muddy overalls after a frog-gigging trip, or Louisiana screaming unintelligible ramblings while in a voodoo trance.

Actually, the only one of his Deep South children who always acted genteel and accommodating was Georgia. And even she wasn't shy about getting her hands dirty if she had to.

"Aw, look at this one," France said as he looked over another photograph from the day before to Spain. "I think ma petite Louisiane inherited her Uncle France's radiant beauty. And Mississippi's smile is just like mine, don't you think, mon ami?"

"Oh, sí," said Spain. "And I think all three of them inherited my musical skills." He was referring, of course, to an occurrence the previous day in which the three states had chosen to show off their talents on instruments and had started a jam-session in the park that had drawn quite a crowd.

France huffed at that.

"Non, you are mistaken there, mon ami," he said. "They obviously inherited my fabulous sense of rhythm."

America just smiled absently at the friendly argument. Personally, he felt that both France and Spain had contributed plenty to the culture of the South, in equal measure. Not all of it was necessarily good, but America tried to focus on the positives.

"It's not bloody fair," England grumbled beside him as they sat at the conference table. "Why is it that all my former colonies hate me, but France's and Spain's absolutely adore them? How is that right?!"

"England, dude," said America, "not all your former colonies hate you."

"Name one that doesn't."

"Georgia doesn't hate you."

"All right, I'll concede that she doesn't hate me. But she doesn't like me the way France's former colonies like him."

"And how about Canada? He likes you."
"...Who?"

America threw a sympathetic look towards his twin, who was sitting across from them and had clearly heard England forget his existence for the millionth time. Canada just gave a sigh and returned to looking over his papers. Honestly, sometimes America wondered if his brother was cursed or something. Between being invisible most of the time – even to his former caretaker – to having Quebec constantly threatening rebellion and British Columbia perpetually high as a kite, it was a wonder Canada hadn't snapped and gone on a murderous rampage by now. Perhaps he was just bottling up his rage for hockey season?

America had to repress a slight shudder at that thought and simply turned back to England with a reassuring smile.

"Well, so what if a few former colonies don't like you?" he said. "Since when have you cared about being Mr. Popular?"

England just face-planted on the table and stewed in his own self-pity. America thought England was being a bit overly-dramatic. Sure, most of the Thirteen (all right, everyone except Georgia and maybe Delaware) hated England. Plus a few of the later states that went through the War of 1812. And the states that just hated everyone but themselves on principle (Texas sprang to mind, instantly). And, to be fair, not all of France's and Spain's former territories liked them. Florida would probably sic a gator on Spain if he saw him, and Arkansas...

BANG!

*Speak of the devil,* America thought to himself.

"What'dya mean I can't bring my shotgun in here?!"

Clearly security had stopped Arkansas for carrying weapons. Though there was no chance in hell that his son would surrender his shotgun. Most of the Southern states were like that. Actually, most of his states, in general, were like that. Really, it was just California who refused to touch firearms (though America suspected she still kept that old pistol of hers under her bed for emergencies), and Illinois often made comments about creating more gun laws (though America knew with *certainty* that Illinois had an entire armory which he kept to deal with any disgruntled 'legitimate businessmen'). Oh, and New Jersey never bothered with guns, as she always said that a good old American right-hook was far more satisfying, especially when one backed up the punch with a pair of brass knuckles.

There was the brief sound of a scuffle before the door slammed open.

"PA! Tell these rassin'-frassin', no-good, dirty, rotten idgits that I ain't gonna let no strangers touch my shotgun!"

Everyone in the room had frozen in shock. No one, but no one, had ever expected the sight that now stood before them. They had thought they had seen the most of France's impact on America the other night with Louisiana. But nothing could have prepared them for the teenage boy who now stood before them, clutching his shotgun to his chest possessively and wearing such a look of outrage that it was a wonder he didn't explode from the sheer amount of fury he must have been feeling.

He looked exactly like France. Well, a teenage France. Meaning he was shorter and did not have the chin stubble. But, nevertheless, he had the same long, silky, golden hair and striking blue eyes. He also seemed to have the same air of perceived superiority about him that France often exuded.
He was dressed rather ruggedly; his loose cotton shirt was left mostly unbuttoned over his chest, his heavy boots had traces of dried mud, and he was wearing some sort of beaded, Native American necklace. A closer look showed he also had a single diamond stud earring in his left ear.

"Arkansas, this is a world conference," America said patiently. "What do you need to bring a shotgun in here for, anyway?"

"Ya don't actually think I'm goin' anywhere without my shotgun, Pa?"

"How did you even get that thing on the plane?"

"Same way Ana brought her cutlass. Now, Pa, I'm tryin'a be polite and all that, but there comes a point when a man has to stand up and fight for his rights."

"We're not in the U.S., kiddo. I'm pretty certain the rules for guns are not the same."

"Well, then, I'll pray for whatever idgit thought up the rule that says I can't bring my shotgun with me wherever I go."

America sighed and counted to ten. It was the same old story with Arkansas. If anyone stood between him and his right to bear arms, he retaliated in the best way he knew how. Meaning that he threatened to kill that person, usually with the very firearm that was about to be taken away. At least it was just Arkansas this time; heaven help the person who tried to separate Texas from a gun.

"What did you need, Noah?" he asked.

"What I need is a ticket home," Arkansas snapped. "I'm goin' out of my mind in this girly city. My 'sweet, adorable, and perfect' sisters and that little wuss Alabama keep gossipin' and talkin' about shoppin'. If I hadn't left them when I did, I know they was goin' to give me a gosh-darned makeover, Pa. Lordy, if I have to hear one more word about fashion, I swear, I'm gonna scream. And, to top it all off, Missouri still won't stop playin' that dag-gammed fiddle o'his at odd hours o'the night. Send Me. Home!"

"Son, are you sure you can't just-"

"NOW!"

America took another deep breath. Arkansas had never been the most patient of his children.

"Um, America?" a rather thunderstruck England said from beside him, finally drawing his attention away from the fuming mini-France. "What…who is this?"

Before America could answer, Arkansas introduced himself.

"The name's 'Noah Jean Jones,'" he said, his anger having melted away as he at last remembered the Southern manners which had been drilled into his head when he was a child. "The state of Arkansas. At your service, sir."

England was a bit hesitant to respond, considering how badly it usually ended when he met America's states. And the fact that this latest state so heavily resembled France only made England more reluctant. Still, ever a gentleman, he stood from his seat and approached the boy.

England was surprised when he wasn't set upon by an angry, screaming, American teenager baying for his blood. Not even the faintest hint of rage or disgust crossed the boy's face as Arkansas simply shook England's hand.

"Pleasure's all mine, sir," said Arkansas. "Always nice to meet family. After all, ya are Pa's big brother from across the ocean, ain't ya?"

"Um, well, yes. I suppose."

England had never felt as disturbed as he did when the France-lookalike gave him a sincere and friendly smile with not a trace of smugness, deviousness, or perversion. The boy, despite his rather loud entrance before, seemed to be one of the few states that didn't want to tar and feather him. The very thought terrified England beyond belief.

"Great," Arkansas replied. "Hope to see ya at the next family get-together. My siblin's and I are havin' a contest to see who can deep-fry the strangest thing. Though, I don't see how anyone can top my deep-fried beer."

"You…you deep-fried…beer?"

"Sure did! Well, I s'pose Texas did some of the work. What with the fact that she invented it and all."

England just stared at him blankly.

"Anyhow, Pa," Arkansas said, turning back to America, "If ya could get me that there ticket home, I'd be much obliged."

America gave another sigh, this one out of resignation, and got out his phone and quickly arranged a seat for Arkansas on the next flight back to the U.S. In all honesty, he hadn't had much hope in bringing Arkansas with him to Paris. He knew the others would be more than happy to learn about their French roots, but Arkansas…Arkansas had never exactly been quite as keen on French culture as his fellow Southern states. America wasn't even sure why, of all the states, Arkansas resembled France the most. Even Virginia, who was regarded as a legacy of the British Empire, had more French qualities than Arkansas did due to the Huguenots that had once settled in her lands.

"Thank ya kindly, Pa," said Arkansas. "See ya back at the ranch, and all that." He then gave a polite bow to the assembled nations in the room. "Gentlemen, ladies."

He then turned and left. Total silence following him. When everyone finally broke free of the stupor, they all turned to look at France.

France's face was frozen in an expression of mute horror. It was as though he had just witnessed the arrival and departure of a demon from the deepest pits of Hell.

England couldn't fight it anymore and began laughing louder than he had in centuries.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I like to imagine Arkansas as looking like the rough and rugged adventurer type. Also, the whole 'Arkansas looking like France' thing is from another state fic I like and I just had to use it.
A point of note. All the states are armed, not just the Southerns. Even the states that have strong restrictions on gun ownership are armed. The Southern states just like to flash their guns a bit more than their siblings.

Arkansas' anger burns out pretty quickly once he realizes it's not appropriate for certain situations. Situations like meeting big, famous nations, especially extended family like England. After all, Arkansas is still a Southern gentleman and his momma taught him proper manners.

Also, deep-fried beer is a real thing. I actually found it on a list of weird state fair foods in Texas. Not Arkansas, I know, but, considering the two are neighbors (sort of), I figured there must be some kind of overlap. And, let's be honest here, deep-fried beer is totally something an Arkansan would attempt, too.
Missouri was bored.

He was not really the type to get bored easily, but he could honestly say that he was bored. Louisiana had decided to dump all the work onto him for the mission, so he was left to follow their father around all day and then send out coded messages to the agents hiding in the van outside the hotel. The way he was to do this was by playing his renditions of certain Disney songs on his precious fiddle (a gift from his dear sister Georgia, who had been the one to teach him how to play). Of course, doing this provoked a round of whining from Arkansas, who didn't like the fact that his beauty sleep was being interrupted. At least Arkansas had finally had enough and gone home; he always made everything ten times more complicated than it needed to be.

So far, the 'mission' had consisted of just following his father to work, trailing after him in the shadows, and listening in on his conversations. Nothing had occurred which might merit an intervention – or retaliation – from the states. He didn't understand why it had been necessary for him to even be involved in this. He knew well that, even if the other nations tried something, America would more than likely come out on top in most every kind of scenario.

After several days of observing his father while Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi spent time with those two European "uncles" of theirs, Missouri was fairly certain that there was nothing particularly remarkable or significant about his supposed mission.

Today had been no different.

Except…there was one thing that had given Missouri some cause for concern, recently. It had nothing to do with the other nations, but it was a source of worry.

Missouri checked on his father at night, occasionally, just to make sure nothing was out of place. Unfortunately, Louisiana's slip-up at the reception that one evening had brought back a recurring problem for their father. You see, America had some…issues for which he refused to be treated. While his father was normally a bright, airheaded, and unassailably cheerful person, there were things that troubled him deeply. However, it was still all too common in the U.S. for mental health problems to be brushed off as something that a person could just "get over." It probably explained why America's children had so many issues, as well. America's problem, though, manifested in the form of night terrors. He'd only agreed to start having therapy sessions last year, after some of the cuter states had given him a puppy-eyed guilt-trip and pleaded with him to talk to someone about it.

However, the night terrors were still very easy to trigger. It had been hell keeping people from finding out about them when America had joined the World Wars. Having the Allies finding out that the United States had night terrors would not be a good thing.

But this wasn't the twentieth century or a battlefield. It was a simple world conference, like those
America had been to hundreds of times before. Missouri mentally cursed at Louisiana for being so careless in bringing up the past. His sister may have a talent with words, just like their mother, but she was not exactly subtle and, like their father, preferred not to read the atmosphere if it did not suit her. He couldn't entirely blame Louisiana, though, as the night terrors had turned out to be a problem for America since childhood and had only worsened after what had happened with Mother. Anything could set them off, really.

Missouri didn't give in much to that psycho-babble talk. It never made much sense to him. As far as he was concerned, if you couldn't see it, smell it, touch it, or anything like that, he was hard-pressed to believe in it. Really, the only exception he made was when it came to God. However, his very matter-of-fact view of the world was often shaken when he peeked into his father's room and saw the strong, proud nation thrashing, face streaked with sweat, as he tried to fend off whatever phantasms plagued his dreams.

While Missouri, himself, never dreamed in solid images, he understood the fear that came from bad memories. Sometimes, his own nights were haunted by flickers of colors – the glowing orange and yellow from torches – and the sounds of screams for mercy and the rush of panic as he suddenly found he couldn't breathe and –

He moved a hand up under the collar of his shirt, feeling the faint trace of scarring where a rope had once dug into his neck.

No, he would not think about that. Ever. The family had enough problems without one more child going crazy. He just silently made his way back to his room and got the fiddle out of its case. Gently, he moved the bow back and forth across the strings, and the tune of "A Dream is a Wish your Heart Makes" came from the instrument.

England was becoming quite frustrated.

Ever since the revelation that America had once been married had come out, England had been trying to coax some answers out of his former little brother. So far, America had stonewalled him at every turn. America's twin brother, that other North American country, whose name still escaped him for some reason, had learned about what England was trying to do and had even confronted him about it, telling him to leave it alone and not open up old wounds. But England, for all his propriety and manners, couldn't back down when his curiosity had been peaked.

Which was why he was currently sitting in a bar with America and attempting to ply him with booze.

"So, we haven't really had the chance to turn up a pint and chat, lately," England said in what he was certain was a convincing tone.

"Yeah, sure, Iggy," said America with a typical dopey smile. However, regardless of what the other nations believed – or once believed, as their perceptions of the world had been shaken rather badly, recently – America was not totally oblivious. He knew exactly what England was fishing for.

"After all, despite everything, we are still brothers, aren't we?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"And, being brothers, we shouldn't keep secrets from each other, right?"

"No, I guess we shouldn't."

"Excellent. Because there is something I would very much like to speak with you about."
"It's okay, Iggy. I know."

"So let's – wait. You know what, exactly?"

"About you and France. It's cool, Iggy. I've known you were gay this whole time. Took you long enough to come out of the closet."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?! I'm not gay and – what do mean by me and France?! Even if I were gay, what makes you think I'd be with that damn wanker?!"

"Well, I always figured you guys just liked to play up the whole love-hate thing."

England fumed as America chuckled.

"That's not what I was trying to talk to you about, you idiot," England continued, barely reining in his ire. "I've been trying to ask you about why you never told me that you were marri-"

"Oh, hey, would you look at that?" America said suddenly. "They've got a pinball machine over there. Be back in a sec, dude!"

As America darted out of sight, England slumped in his chair and stared at his drink. Why was it so difficult to get that stupid git to talk to him? Sure, they weren't as close as they'd been a long, long time ago, but they still cared about each other. At least, England cared about America. Even if he didn't say as much out loud, he'd never forgotten about his little brother. And knowing that there was something wrong with America that he couldn't fix was eating away at his conscience.

"You'll never get through to my Dad talkin' to him like that. Might I recommend pokin' him with a stick?"

England looked up and saw a teenage boy take the chair on his other side. The boy was tall, had dark brown skin, thick and untidy black hair that was held back by a headband that circled around his forehead, and dark, brownish-green eyes. His clothes were a little loose and baggy, and he was wearing a jacket with the collar turned up. The only really odd thing about him was that he wasn't wearing any shoes.

"Afternoon, sir," the boy said. When the bartender leaned over, the boy just asked for a coke. He spoke in French, but there was something different about it that made the bartender wince before turning away. "Psh, every time I try to speak like these folks, they look at me like I got two heads," he said, more to himself than to England. He then looked back up with a smile. "Name's 'Missouri.' 'Course, my Christian name would be 'Moses Vincent Jones.' Nice to meet you, sir."

England introduced himself and shook the state's hand.

"Um, not to sound rude or anything," he said. "But...why aren't you wearing shoes?"

"Why, is it Sunday?"

"No."

"I only wear shoes at church or the state fair. Since this is neither, I'll dress as befits my preferences, sir."

"Very well." England took a lengthy pause. "I'm sorry, but there is something else."

"Oh, what?"
"I don't suppose you can tell me about your mother."

"Lord, you folks really do want to just cut right to the heart on this, don'tcha?"

"I'm sorry, that was impertinent of me."

"Nah, can't blame you folks for bein' curious about her. It's just not somethin' we can really talk about. But you're a smart man, I'm sure you can figure out who she was."

England's brow furrowed in thought as he tried to put together the clues which had been dropped thusfar. Louisiana had mentioned that her mother had once fought at New Orleans and had died on a battlefield – Appomattox, that was it – in a war involving the sou—

England's eyes went wide as it clicked.

"Finally got it, did you?" said Missouri, who then took a long sip of his coke. "I figured you would be the most likely to put it all together, Mr. England."

"What I don't understand is how it happened," said England. "Wouldn't someone have known about her? And it doesn't explain why Mexico has been acting like she's going to shoot the next person to bring the subject up within earshot."

"Texas."

"Texas?"

"My sister. She's the reason for most of the fighting."

"In what way?"

"That is a story for another time and I ain't really the right one to tell it. If you meet Texas, she'll probably brag about what happened. Or Tennessee might do it. Lord knows that girl is a jabberjaw. 'Course, once she gets goin', she turns all teary-eyed and starts apologizin' to Dad and it all gets real awkward."

"But what-?"

"Oh, hey, dudes!" came America's voice. "I got the high score on that pinball machine."

Missouri just quirked his brow in incredulity. Not at the thought that his father couldn't easily have gotten a high score, but more in regards to the fact that he had not seen any trace of a pinball machine in the establishment. Something in Missouri's gut told him that his father had been listening to their conversation – and Missouri's gut was seldom wrong.

"You two getting along?" America said brightly.

"Sure, Dad," said Missouri. He took one final sip of his coke before setting the glass down. "Must be goin'. Remember, Dad, we've got that early flight tomorrow."

"Right! Need to get back and start the Halloween decorating. Hey, Iggy, you coming to my Halloween party this year?"

"Don't I always, you twit?" said England. While he was no less curious than he had been before, England realized he wouldn't find out anything more just then. He would have to wait for the truth to unfold.
"Kay, dude. See you then."

As America and Missouri left the bar, America's phone started beeping furiously. When he looked at it, he gave a chuckle.

"Oh, would you look at that," he said. "Massachusetts just won the World Series."

"New York won't be happy about that," Missouri replied.

"What do want to bet Markus is going to be dressed up as Babe Ruth for Halloween?"

"And tryin' to put the curse back on Johnny. Do you think he's ever gonna let it go?"

Father and son stared at each other for a moment before bursting out laughing. There was no chance in hell of New York ever letting anything go, especially not things he perceived as personal insults. Massachusetts winning a World Series, despite it not being against New York, himself, was still, as far as New York was concerned, tantamount to a crime against the laws of the universe.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Decided to play up the America and England bro-feels in this. My next two chapters are going to be special for Halloween.

Missouri was where Walt Disney grew up (he was born in Chicago, Illinois, but moved to Kansas City, Missouri when he was about ten).

The United States has one of the worst track records when it comes to treating mental health problems. There's a stigma placed on people with mental problems (as someone who's wrestled with depression, I've heard the "just get over it" spiel, myself) and you are expected to bury your problems beneath a happy exterior or risk being regarded as selfish, lazy, or weak. I think America and the States have felt compelled to bury their pain and sadness, too, which is why the States like to lash out at each other and why they can seem so unstable.

Missouri is known as the "show me" state. The phrase is meant to imply a strong sense of skepticism in words without substance to back something up. Missouri doesn't trust psychology or psychiatry because it deals in something you can't see. I also think this extends to his belief in supernatural forces (I headcanon that he thinks Tony the alien is just a guy with a medical condition). However, as he is also part of the Bible Belt, he is devoutly Christian, which kind of contends with his whole "see it to believe it" outlook on life.

Missouri has its own dialect of French which is distinct from both standard French and Louisiana's colonial French. In fact, Missouri French is classified as an endangered language because most of the speakers are the older generation and there aren't many younger people learning it.

Also, congrats to the Red Sox on their victory. As I said, I don't really follow sports, but I heard about the World Series results and just thought it would be polite to give it a mention. "The curse" of Babe Ruth was allegedly placed on the Boston Red Sox after they traded the baseball star to the New York Yankees. The curse said that the Red Sox would
never win a World Series again (their last win being in 1918). However, the "curse" was broken when the Red Sox won in 2004.
After America and his children returned home, the invitations to his annual Halloween party arrived.

The other nations were a little leery of coming to America's house again now that they knew about his insane children. However, as always, a large contingent of countries arranged to attend what had always proven in the past to be a spectacular festivity that allowed them to dress up in flashy costumes and eat a ton of candy without feeling ashamed. A few countries even came early to help America set up for the party, and to get a sneak peek at what they could expect in regards to Halloween scare tactics.

Normally, America hosted the party at his house in D.C. This year, however, he chose to hold the festivities in Connecticut. At his son's house. The reason for this change was soon apparent.

Connecticut's house was an enormous, old mansion that, had America not kitted the place out with decorations, would have easily been creepy enough on its own. The fact that storm clouds had gathered overhead and an icy wind whistled through the vibrant masses of orange, red, and yellow leaves on the numerous trees that covered the property left the visiting nations with a faint sense of unease.

"Ve~ Germany, this place is spooky," Italy said.

"Italy, I am certain it is fine," Germany replied patiently. "America might not be the sensible nation, but I doubt he would put us in any real danger."

"Good evening," said a sly voice from behind them.

The nations jumped. Turning around sharply, they were met by the familiar, smirking figure of Connecticut. He was dressed in a dark red suit with an attached pointed tail at the back, a pair of devil horns on his head, and a pitchfork in his hand. They calmed slightly, and England rather forcefully dropped France – who had leapt up into his arms in fright – unceremoniously to the ground.

"Welcome, boils and ghouls," Connecticut said. "I am delighted that you have managed to make it to my humble home."

"Aiyah," said China. "Why'd you sneak up on us, aru?"

"Apologies. I certainly hope I didn't frighten you. You are somewhat early, though. The party doesn't start until after sundown."

"Let me guess," said England. "It would interfere with America's aesthetic?"
"No one asked you," Connecticut said with a glare at England. "And, no, it's because he always takes the little ones trick-or-treating before his party so that they're not out late."

"Little ones?" said Germany.

"The youngest states, of course. And the territories. You see, while you 'adults' are having your fancy soiree, we states shall be having our own gathering in my media room." He frowned at them seriously. "And there had better be no interruptions or we will be most displeased. Anyway, I must be off, I have to hide some bodies before the rest of the guests arrive and…whoops, I've said too much."

He suddenly pulled out a small pellet from his pocket and slammed it to the floor, causing a puff of smoke to appear.

"Muahahaha," his voice echoed out. However, as the smoke cleared, he could still be seen retreating around the side of the house. He glanced back and saw that the nations had spotted him. "Oh, fiddlesticks."

Once he trudged off, the nations turned back to the front door, which slammed open to admit them. Entering the house, they found that America had already put up most of his decorations. The nation, himself, descended the long staircase in the entrance hall, smiling cheerily at his guests.

"Hey, dudes," he said. "Thanks for coming by to help. I appreciate it. Things have been kinda hectic today."

"America-san," said Japan, "I am confused about what else we can help with. Your house seems to be very well decorated as it is."

"Huh? What, these? Japan, buddy, I'm nowhere near finished. The only part of the house I'm satisfied with is the ballroom, but none of you get to see that until the party. I got crates more stuff in the storage room. Just follow me."

The nations cautiously trailed after America, the tapping of their shoes on the marble floor echoing throughout. A chill seemed to pass over them as they proceeded deeper into the house. None of them noticed a pair of violet eyes watching them from the upstairs banister.

Cold. Always cold.

It is part of me and I of it. From the moment I was born, there was ice inside my soul. All around me was frigid darkness that never seemed to end. Cold, dark, screams, pain, alone…always.

And hunger. Such hunger.

I died from it every day. Over and over and over.

But, then, light shone out in that darkness. My midnight sun. He melted the ice and drove away the darkness. I saw blue…bright, beautiful, glorious blue.

Warm arms cradled me as I saw a smile of blinding brilliance. Many smiling faces, all around.

"I love you, Little Angel."

"I will protect you."

"I will never forget about you."
Safe. For the first time, I was safe. I was loved. I was wanted. Never alone again.

Nothing would keep me away from this warmth. I would do everything in my power to ensure I would never be taken from you. I even begged for the markings to be put on my face. Special markings to keep away the Khoughkh, for there is only room within this body for one soul and I do not share. I will not allow anything to interfere with my devotion to you.

For, as you remembered me, I will remember you. Always. I will love you. I will protect you. I will destroy any who would do you harm. I will see your persecutors suffer for daring to threaten you. I hear them when they scheme and connive. They believe they are safe and secure in their homes, but I will find them. I will hunt them down like animals.

And they will bleed.

"Does anyone else feel that?" said England with a shudder.

"You mean the sensation like ice creeping into your very soul?" said France.

"I don't feel anything," said America.

"How can you not feel it, aru?!" China shouted. "I bet it is Russia! Only he makes an aura like that, aru."

"What?" said Russia in confusion. He hadn't felt anything odd, either. "Why me? I am not currently angry at any of your stupid faces."

"I am certain I feel something off," said England.

"Maybe your imaginary friends are annoyed with you," America said with a snicker.

"Piss off! My friends and I are just fine! Next weekend, we're going to play a few rounds of cricket."

Everyone just exchanged wary looks.

"Dude, I don't know what's wrong with you," said America. "Any of you. But I just don't feel anything weird. The only ones in here are us nations. Well, and Alaska."

"And…who?" said England.

That was when the nations noticed a small entity slowly emerging from around a corner. It was surrounded by a dark, purplish aura, eyes narrowed into white slits, as it muttered something furiously. None of the nations could understand what the creature was saying, as it was in some strange language they hadn't heard before, but it was faintly reminiscent of Russia's "Kolkolkol."

"Sweet Merlin's saggy left arse-cheek!" England screamed. "What the bloody hell is that?!"

"Aiyah!" China added, clutching his head as if physically pained by its presence. "Make it go away, aru!"

"Germany, save me!" Italy cried, clinging to his friend. He had also withdrawn a white flag and was waving it desperately.

Romano, in contrast, said nothing as he tried to shove Spain forward as a sacrifice to appease the
unholy creature that had surely crawled out from the deepest circle of Hell to torment them. France was sobbing about being 'too pretty to die.' Japan had gone strangely pale and was shaking his head, as if trying to deny what he was seeing. The only nation besides America to not be affected was Russia, who just smiled and waved at the dark creature.

America quirked a brow at his colleagues' reactions.

"What's wrong with you guys?" he said. He then started to feel a bit angry as he realized the fear in the room was being directed at his daughter. "Alaska just wanted to say 'hello.' Didn't you, Little Angel?"

The dark aura vanished as soon as America turned around. She was a tiny child, maybe seven or eight in physical terms, with big, violet eyes that glittered innocently. Her dark brown hair was tied into a pair of thick braids, one on either side of her head; though she had a tiny loose curl that stood up at the back. Across her cheeks and down the front of her chin were thin, tribal tattoos. She would have been cute, had the nations not just witnessed the darkness that followed her.

"Yes, Ataata," she said. She looked at the cowering nations and gave a smile that seemed to split her face in half with rows of inhumanly sharp teeth. "Hello! I am being Alisiya Jones. We will all be friends, yes?"

Japan would never admit it, but he was very, very close to crying in terror.

The demon that haunted his nightmares for decades was real. He had tried to pretend that that brief time in World War II when he invaded the Aleutian Islands was all just a terrible dream. Because, if it wasn't, then that meant the bloodthirsty creature that loomed in the cold and darkness was out there waiting to get its hands on him again.

The beast turned her violet eyes on him and smiled. Japan nearly fainted.

The time was WWII...

Japan watched on, fighting back a grimace of disgust, as some of his soldiers corralled several Aleutians into a truck that would take them to the waiting ship. Men, women, and children were all being sent to an internment camp in Hokkaido. Japan tried to block out the sounds of the crying children; he had his orders and he couldn't disobey them. No matter how wrong it seemed.

A young woman was struggling fiercely and had to be dragged by two soldiers on either side of her. She looked like many of the other natives; dark brown hair and dark eyes and those strange tattoos on her face. However, there was something…odd about her that Japan couldn't quite place.

The woman noticed him watching her and snarled something in her language that, if Japan had to guess, was undoubtedly a curse. But then, a cruel smile crossed her lips and she began to laugh. It was a very unsettling sound and even the hardened soldiers restraining her began to show cracks in their stony expressions.

She said something else. Japan would never know exactly what it was, but, judging from the triumphant look on her face, he would later assume it was a taunt about what he and his troops would soon go through.

As the woman began to laugh again, another soldier lost his patience and struck her sharply. But the woman just kept smiling as she joined her people in the truck. A harsh, icy wind whipped around them and caused the men to clutch their coats tighter. Japan, himself, couldn't help but shiver.
They were on a foraging mission. Supplies were not coming in readily ever since America's forces had attack the convoys off the Komandorski Islands. Japan had thought he knew what cold was, but the slightest chill in this wasteland felt like thousands of pins in his skin, even beneath the thick layers of clothing. He and his men would not last if they didn't find food and stay warm.

Japan tried not to question the decisions of his leaders, but he had to admit that this was truly a foolhardy campaign. How those native people could stand to live in such a place was beyond him.

As the frigid air ripped across his face in a fury of frozen ice, Japan spotted something standing off in the distance. A tiny, dark figure. When a flurry of snow blew past, it suddenly vanished. Japan tried to ignore it as a trick of the mind as he and his men pressed onwards.

However, Japan couldn't fight the impulse to look back. The figure was there, closer this time. Japan called out to the company leader, telling him he believed there was someone following them. They suspected that the American forces were drawing closer to their position, though they hadn't expected them to be there anytime soon, so they couldn't be too careful. The commander fired a warning shot at the figure, but it didn't move. However, another gust of wind blasted against them, forcing them back and making them all shut their eyes out of instinct. When they opened them again, the figure had once again disappeared.

Once they returned to camp and bunkered in at the crude structure that served as their shelter, Japan tried to put the unnerving experience from earlier out of his mind. However, the way the wind moaned across the land brought of memories of dark tales from the past. Of demons and evil spirits, like the Yuki-Onna. And, though he tried desperately to sleep, Japan was certain he heard scratching noises on the door, the walls, the roof – all around him in that darkness and cold.

When they all woke up the next morning, something had ravaged the camp. Supplies had vanished, engines in the vehicles had been ripped apart, and the radio had been smashed. What was more, three men had disappeared in the night without a word.

Things like that persisted over the following week. The camp would be wrecked, men would go missing, strange noises would plague them in the night, and that mysterious figure would appear in the distance.

Finally, the commander was fed up with the occurrences, especially after the third night watch in a row had vanished without a trace, and decided that the Americans must have a guerilla force attacking them. Rousing everyone in the camp, he organized a group to go out and find their enemies and put an end to their interference. Japan couldn't help the lingering doubt he had, even as he strapped the gun over his shoulder.

Hours upon hours, they trudged deeper into the wilderness. A brutal storm had stirred up and the cold was unbearable. Men soon began dropping just from the sheer agony of it. Still, the commander pushed them on. However, the storm became so bad that the party nearly collapsed when they seemed to enter right into the worst of it.

Then, all of a sudden, everything was still. Silent, save for the ragged breathing of the soldiers.

And, then, a laugh. A high, tinkling, childlike laugh. A shadow darted behind a nearby rock. The laugh moved with it. Another flicker of shadow, the laugh came from somewhere else. Again and again, each time getting closer.

"Show yourself!" the commander ordered.
The laugh came from directly behind the group. The men whipped around. Standing there was a tiny
girl. She looked like one of the native Aleutians, save for her eyes. Violet eyes that reminded Japan
faintly of Russia; though, by comparison with that girl, Russia's eyes might reasonably be said to
contain a hint of warmth. She said something in a strange language, before tilting her head, almost
curiously, and giving a shy smile.

"Hello," she said clearly; though Japan knew she was not speaking his own language. "I am being
Alisiya. Will you be my friends?"

Before anyone could respond, the girl's smile widened. And widened. It nearly split her entire face in
half as rows of razor sharp teeth were bared. Suddenly, the storm began ripping around them at ten
times the previous force. A total whiteout. All around him, Japan could hear his men screaming, guns
firing, and a little girl laughing.

"Won't you be my friend?" her voice called out.

Japan had never considered himself cowardly, by any means. If he had to, he would fight until his
very last breath. In those moment, though – those terrible, horrible moments – all he could do was
throw himself to the ground and shut his eyes and pray to whatever higher power was listening to
spare him.

Then…it was quiet. Quieter than before. He heard nothing.

Japan dreaded looking up. All he wanted in that instant was for the ground to swallow him whole so
that he wouldn't have to see it. Unfortunately, honor compelled him to raise his head to meet his end
like a man.

The little girl – the little demon – was just standing there in front of him, watching him with those
wicked eyes. The heavy furs she wore were stained red and there were thick spatters all over her face
and dripping from loose strands of her hair. But there was nothing and no one else around. Not even
a hint of where his men had fallen or what had happened to their bodies. Japan had no doubt that the
girl had killed them, as impossible as it seemed, but there was nothing left of them to find.

The girl just blinked at him innocently.

"Will you be my friend?"

Present Day…

America cheerfully prattled on about how 'amazing' his party was going to be this year as he handed
out the boxes of decorations he wanted to add. Alaska stayed close by his side, smiling and giggling
at what he said.

Japan kept the monstrous creature within his sights at all times. Never again. Never, ever again.

He didn't even realize he was shaking until Italy turned and asked him what was wrong.

"You saw that little monster, Italy-san," Japan said quietly. It wouldn't do for the monster, in
question, to overhear. "She's evil."

"Ve~ Japan, didn't you hear what Mr. America just said?" said Italy. "He explained she was just
being scary because she's frightened of strangers."

"And you actually believed that, Italy-san?"
"Sure! Sometimes people look scary when you first meet them. I once thought Germany was really scary, too, but then I got to know him and we are good friends! Ve~ Maybe you should try making friends with Alaska and she won't seem so sca-"

Japan actually grabbed Italy by the front of his clothes and looked at him with an almost manic expression.

"Italy-san, whatever happens, do not let me be left alone with her," Japan said with obvious desperation.

"Okay, Japan," Italy said uncertainly. "If you say so."

As the nations helped America and Alaska unpack the rest of the boxes of decorations, Japan stayed as far away from the girl as he physically could and made sure he always had at least one other person by his side.

"Ataata," Alaska said to America. "I will go put on my costume, now, yes?"

"Sure thing, Angel," said America. "And I'll take you and the others out just as soon as we get these last couple of decorations up."

Alaska began to walk away, but, as soon as America turned his back, the girl's head swiveled around, her eyes narrowed at Japan, and she let forth a menacing hiss. Japan knew, right then, that this would be the longest night of his entire life.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yandere!Alaska is the only Alaska, as far as I'm concerned.

Khoughkh are evil entities in Aleutian belief who take over people's bodies but can be warded off through the use of tattoos and piercings. Of course, tattooing is a practice in many indigenous groups of Alaska, not just among the Aleutians.

"Ataata" is an Inuit word that means "father." Inuits are one of the native peoples of Alaska.

During WWII, Japan invaded the islands of Attu and Kiska and captured many native Aleut people (the Unangax), prompting the American and Canadian forces to attack. In an American propaganda poster, Alaska was referred to as a "death trap" for the Japanese. That's probably an accurate description of it. In the Battle of Attu, 2,351 Japanese soldiers were killed (possibly more, but the bodies were never found) and 28 taken prisoner out of a force of 2,900. At Kiska, the American and Canadian forces arrived to find the island deserted. The total Japanese force in the Aleutians was 8,500, of which 4,350 were confirmed killed by the end of the campaign.
"Am I pretty, Ataata?" Alaska said, giving her father a wide-eyed, hopeful look.

"Of course you are, Alisiya," America said with a fond smile.

Alaska grinned and gave a little twirl. She had decided she wanted to be Princess Anna from the movie "Frozen" and had cute-talked Montana into dressing up as Elsa because, according to Alaska, Montana looked a lot like the older sister from the Disney film. Montana had agreed with her normal, pleasant civility, which meant no one could understand what she was thinking or how many things she planned to blow up while they were out that night.

A ding-dong came from the door. America answered it, only to find himself tackled by New Mexico and Arizona.

New Mexico was wearing an astronaut costume. America's youngest son had always had a fixation on outer space, much like America, himself. His costumes usually involved space or sci-fi themes.

Arizona, by contrast, had dressed up as Wonder Woman. Normally, she chose a Disney princess costume like Alaska, but it appeared she had opted for a change to superhero this year. Considering America's own costume this year was Captain America, he couldn't exactly blame her.

"¡Papi!" Arizona said as she wrapped her arms around America's legs. "I am so glad you're home, we missed you and I shot five people."

"Aw…wait, what?"

Arizona tensed and smiled nervously as she realized what she'd just said.

"Ahaha. Nothing, Papi!"

"¡Papi, Papi!" New Mexico interjected frantically. "Has everyone arrived? Can we go trick-or-treating yet? Why is it so cold up here? Is Senor Tony around? I want to ask him about some new theories I have about space travel. Are the cousins coming to visit? Because I don't want to be near Alberta in the same room as Texas. And, dios mio, it is so cold up here! Isn't that right, Ari? We were talking on the way over and we both think it is really, really cold up here. Oh, hi, Alaska, your costume looks really pretty. The best one you've worn so far and I think you and Montana will look perfect with how you've coordinated your costumes. And, ay, is it so cold up here!"

"Breathe, kiddo," America said, forgetting instantly about Arizona's little slip as he tried to get New Mexico to calm down.

"So, where are these nation friends of yours, Papi?" said Arizona.

"The ones who came early are just in one of the living rooms. I invited them to come with us, but, for
some reason, none of them seemed interested. I guess they're just tired and want to rest up for the party. The other nations won't be here until a little later."

"Will...will she be here?" Arizona's tone was strangely hard.

"Yes, Baby Girl. Mexico is going to be at the party."

"Hmph. As long as she stays on her side of the house, we won't have any trouble."

"Arizona, that's not a heroic attitude."

"I know, I know. It's just her face makes me angry."

"Hey, wait a minute, Dinah," said New Mexico. "I have the same face as Mamá and you never get angry with me."

"You have different eyes, Juan-Miguel."

New Mexico looked about to say something else, when a new arrival appeared in the doorway. She was a lithe figure with a sweet face, warm brown eyes, and messy, dark brown hair. She was wearing a very frilly angel costume, complete with feathery wings and a glittery halo.

"Philippines!" the children cheered and threw themselves at the laughing female nation.

"Hello, little ones," Philippines said as she stooped down to hug New Mexico, Arizona, and Alaska. "I have missed you so much." She pulled away and then gave America a hug and a familial kiss on the cheek. "And you, Alfred. I hope you are eating right."

"Despite what everyone thinks, I actually do eat stuff other than burgers," said America.

Philippines smiled and then turned and beckoned to a small group of children standing outside. The territories came rushing in and started hugging America and the states, babbling cheerfully about their trip and their costumes. Puerto Rico, as usual, stubbornly refused to let go of America.

"Not until you make me a state," the boy said seriously.

America just rolled his eyes, stooped down, and picked his small foster son up and set him on his shoulders. The boy pouted but didn't protest.

"Thanks for stopping to get them," America said to Philippines. "Is Hawaii with you?"

"No," Philippines said with a slight frown.

"Big Sister Hawaii wouldn't come," American Samoa said sadly.

"Maybe she didn't want to look at someone's stupid face," Guam added with a glare at Northern Mariana Islands, who responded by sticking his tongue out at his sister.

"Okay, dudes, let's be cool," America said, hoping to diffuse the situation. Guam and Northern Mariana Islands had not gotten on well ever since WWII and it was a miracle that, regardless of their childlike appearances, they hadn't gotten into a fistfight yet. "Halloween is a time for fun and candy."

"Candy!" Virgin Islands cheered. She bounced up and down excitedly, her Little Mermaid costume glittering in the light. She grabbed America's hand and started tugging him towards the door. "I want candy! Candy, candy, candy!"
America laughed and led the group of children out, followed by Philippines and a silently smiling Montana. As they headed down the drive to begin their trick-or-treating, Alaska whispered to Guam.

"Guess who I saw, Little Sister," she said.

"Who, Alisya?" said Guam.

"Mr. Japan. He is here for the party."

The two little girls smiled wickedly at each other.

Meanwhile, in another wing of Connecticut's mansion, the states who had already arrived were gearing up for their own party. The media room was set up like a movie theater, only in a lighter, homier style, with large, comfy couches instead of regular seats and a central section where they could set up the snack tables. There was an adjacent hallway outside the room which had a backdoor, through which the states had been arriving in order to avoid the adults on the other side of the house.

California was carting in truckloads of films. Iowa and Nebraska made so much popcorn that half the wing was flooded with it. Illinois and New Jersey got into an argument about who would be making the pizzas (had New York been present, he would have added his own infuriated screaming about why his own pizza was best).

"Hallo, losers!" Pennsylvania shouted as she burst in through the backdoor. It was clear that 'Sylvia' was in charge for the holiday and had decided to dress up as a somewhat mature and slightly provocative Red Riding Hood. She was followed by Ohio, who was dressed as a werewolf (likely at Pennsylvania's insistence so that they could match). "Guess who brought the swag!"

She snapped her fingers and a work crew brought in crates of candy and various other sugary snacks. Once the crew finished delivering everything, Pennsylvania signed a few forms and handed the work leader a wad of cash for a service tip. As soon as she shut the door behind them, Pennsylvania plopped down on one of the large couches, clutching a giant Hershey bar.

"Anyone seen Mass?" she said, taking a large bite out of the chocolate.

"Taxachusetts said he had to get evahrything he needed fuh his costume," New Hampshire said, scowling heavily as she sat nearby with Vermont. She was dressed as a female Robin Hood (some of her siblings had tried to convince her to dress as Merida from Brave, but she refused; their cousin Nova Scotia had already chosen that costume and, even though the Canadians were spending Halloween at home this year, New Hampshire had no desire to copy) and Vermont was wearing a hippie getup that some of the states had jokingly said just looked like his regular clothes.

After a brief knock, the door opened again, revealing the smiling faces of the Southern states.

"Oh, wonderful," Connecticut drawled. "The rabble is here."

"Ahahaha, shut up," said Tennessee with a cold smile.

"Yeah, cram it, Northerner," said South Carolina.

As the Southern states shuffled inside, Connecticut suddenly frowned and stopped Alabama as he took in his costume. Alabama was dressed in a rather slapdash outfit that seemed to be comprised of various bits and pieces he'd grabbed from a bargain bin at the last minute.
"Alabama, what the devil are you supposed to be?" said Connecticut.

"Was that, I say, was that meant to be a joke?" Alabama said, giving his older brother a look up and down.

"As a matter of fact, it was not. I know you've never exactly been clever with your costumes in the past, but I honestly have no idea what you were thinking with this."

"It's not my fault, I say, it's not my fault that the stores sold out of anythin' good."

"Alabama was originally gonna come dressed as a ghost," said Mississippi. She gave slight wince. "Dat is, he was, until I reminded him dat a redneck in a white sheet ain't exactly de best idea."

"For God's sake, Alabama, you utter nincompoop," Connecticut said with a frustrated sigh.

"What?" Alabama whined as the other states gave him incredulous looks. "All of us dressed as ghosts when trick-or-treatin' was invented. I say, everyone's just gotten so sensitive."

"And they, like, have a good reason to be," said California.

"To be fair to Alabama, here," said Kentucky. "It ain't Halloween unless someone gets offended."

"Speaking of being offensive," said Ohio. "Where's West Virginia?"

The whirring of a chainsaw was suddenly heard and a girl in a blood-spattered zombie hunter costume shoved her way inside, shooting everyone a contemptuous look as she claimed one of the sofas. Kentucky and Tennessee just smiled and went to sit by her, as they were the only ones who weren't bothered by her abrasive attitude. West Virginia scowled at them, but said nothing.

"Hidey-ho! Guess who else is here!" came a cheery voice from outside. More than a few states groaned when they saw Utah leading the remainder of the Western and Midwestern states in.

"There's somethin' not right about him," Missouri whispered to Louisiana, who nodded.


As if sensing their animus, Utah grinned widely at Missouri and Arkansas and pulled them into a hug that lifted them off the ground. The two squirmed in his hold, able to put aside their mutual dislike for each other as their focus had been directed to the far more irritating target crushing the breath out of their lungs.

"How're my favorite big brothers doin'?" Utah said.

"Utah, put them down," Kansas said frantically. "You're smothering them!"

Utah's smile was almost painful to look at as he set the two irate states back on their feet, completely ignoring the very unpleasant looks they directed at him. Instead, he simply moved over to the snack tables and pulled out a Tupperware container which he opened, revealing green Jell-O with carrots in it, and set it down amidst the diverse assortment of junk foods.

"Dear Lord, I hate him," said Missouri.

"Thanks for the save, Kansas," said Arkansas.

"No problem," Kansas said with a small smile.
"Yeah, thanks," Missouri mumbled. He threw another glare at Utah before turning back to his little sister. "I like your Dorothy Gale costume, Kansas."

Kansas blinked at him for a moment and then glanced down at her blue and white gingham dress before giving him a confused look.

"What costume?" she said.

The states quickly resumed prepping for their Halloween movie marathon when another knock came from the door.

"I'll get it!" Florida shouted as he finished setting down the drinks. He skipped over to the door and flung it open with a welcoming smile. "¡Hola!"

On the doorstep was a tall, handsome young man. He had well-groomed, dark brown hair and his golden-brown eyes peered out through square curved glasses. He was dressed in a black and gold changshan and was holding a bouquet of vibrant flowers.

"Good evening," he said politely. "Is Eva in?"

Florida turned back inside, took in a deep breath, and hollered at the top of his lungs: "NEVADA! YOUR BOYFRIEND IS HERE!"

There was a brief crash and some muffled Spanish swearing as Nevada practically sprinted back out into the hallway. She immediately straightened herself out into a confident pose as soon as she was within sight of the new arrival. With a sly look on her face, she practically sashayed past an unamused Florida and took her gentleman caller by the arm.

"Shall we get going, Macau?" she said, earning a quiet nod from the man. Throwing a smug look over her shoulder at her brother, she added, "Don't wait up for us."

Florida rolled his eyes and shook his head as he shut the door after Nevada and Macau. He really, really wished he didn't have to live with the mental images of his little sister being involved with anyone, especially someone so enigmatic. Of course, if that guy ever hurt Nevada, well, Florida had a large quantity of guns that were just itching for a live target.

Everything was soon set up and everyone had arrived. Everyone except for Texas, who had called to tell them that she was "busy with important, top-secret stuff" (which the others took to mean she was going on a prank war against politicians who'd pissed her off), and Hawaii, who had also decided not to come because she wanted a quiet evening to herself for a change. New York was also running a little late.

America and Philippines had come in to drop off the youngsters, who had finished their trick-or-treating with sacks full of candy. Before their father and adopted aunt headed over to the nations' party, America gave the older states a serious look.

"Remember, dudes," he said. "You can stay up tonight, but anyone physically ten or younger needs to be in bed no later than nine o'clock. And you are not to put on any movies that could freak them out until after they are in bed."

The older states assured him everything would be fine. America nodded and he and Philippines turned and left to start the nations' party and greet the arriving guests. The instant they were gone the states and territories swarmed into the media room and descended on the snacks like a ravenous horde of locusts.
"Does anyone happen to know where New York is?" said Virginia.

"Don't know, don't care," said Pennsylvania. "Let's just go ahead and pick our first awesome movie."

"I want to watch this one," said Alaska as she held up a DVD. The title of the movie read: *Cannibal Holocaust*.

"Jesus Christ," Illinois muttered.

"Wait, isn't that a snuff film?" Massachusetts said in distaste.

"The director was acquitted of murder charges," said Alaska sweetly. "A few animals were killed onscreen, though."

"Uh-uh, like, no way," said California. "I'm, like, so not gonna watch a film with animal cruelty in it."

"Since there are li'l ones in the room," said Georgia. "How's about we watch somethin' more family friendly? Like *Hocus Pocus* or *The Little Vampire*?"

Alaska pouted and muttered about "no fun" siblings as she snuggled up against her brother Washington, who patted her on the head while trying to prevent himself from cringing.

They went through the more child-friendly films and a few older horror films that were no longer scary for the tastes of the twenty-first century American audience. Soon enough, nine o'clock approached and the territories' eyes began to droop, prompting Georgia and Delaware to usher them upstairs towards the guest rooms. New Mexico and Arizona protested that they were being made to go to bed, too, just because they were physically ten and nine, respectively. Alaska didn't fuss, though she did insist that "Big Brother Washington" should tuck her in. After the older states returned downstairs, however, Alaska and Guam snuck out of their beds and crept in the direction of the adults' party (West Virginia would also discover sometime later that her chainsaw was missing).

The states were just finishing up the original 1978 *Halloween*, with a few of the more cynical states calling out at some of the particularly ridiculous moments, when New York finally joined them

"What, you couldn't wait for me?" New York said.

"You snooze, you lose, York," said New Jersey. "Where were ya, anyway?"

"I was showin' Hong Kong, here, the Village Halloween Parade." He motioned to his friend, who had followed him in. "I invited him to join our party tonight."

"Shouldn't he be ovah with the nations?" said Massachusetts.

"The Old Man refused to permit me to attend," said Hong Kong in a bored tone as if he honestly didn't care. "He said I am not, like, technically a nation and therefore have no business being at a party for nations."

The states offered their sympathies and told him he was more than welcome to hang out with them. New York, meanwhile, gave Massachusetts a disgusted look as he took in his older brother's costume. He had come decked out in Red Sox paraphernalia, face paint, and a shirt that read: *We won! Suck it, New York! The World Series hadn't even been between Massachusetts and New York, but, somehow, everything always came back to their rivalry.*
"I would make a joke about this," said New York, pointing at Massachusetts's attire. "But your face does a good enough job that I don't have to."

Over at the party, the nations were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Except for Japan, whose eyes kept darting around the room.

He'd noticed England sneaking off to try to implement his plan for his and America's annual scare contest. Not that it would do much good now that it had been revealed that one of America's children was a demon from the frozen heart of Hell. If Japan had to guess, the tiny abomination would probably rip the face off anyone she regarded as a threat and, if England wasn't careful, he could easily become her next target should Alaska not take kindly to someone trying to frighten her father.

*Better him than me*, a small, selfish part of Japan's mind whispered to him.

Still, a sense of dread lingered over him. He just couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him. Japan knew it had to be Alaska. She had obviously left her siblings in order to get him when his guard was down, but he wouldn't let her win this time. No, he was not going to be anywhere out of sight of others.

Unfortunately for Japan, staying within a line of sight was getting to be easier said than done as the night wore on, due to the simple fact that being socially obligated to accept food and drink when offered and his determination not to go anywhere alone for hours upon hours had left him in desperate need of a bathroom break. But if he left the safety of the group, he would leave himself vulnerable to the demon child's attack.

However, the pressure was getting to be too much. If he was quick, he might just make it.

Japan cautiously chanced a look out into the hallway, eyes scanning everything for even a hint of Alaska's presence. He took a tentative step forward, the soft creak of the floorboards strangely deafening in the large, empty hall. America had told them earlier where the bathrooms were, but, at the moment, Japan felt as if he were in some kind of labyrinth as he sought one out and he was expecting something to suddenly leap out and grab him at any moment. Heart pounding, Japan ruthlessly upbraided himself for not chancing being rude by turning down refreshments at the party (if he had then he wouldn't have to deal with the discomfort and fear he was experiencing now).

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Japan reached what, if he recalled correctly, was the door to one of the bathrooms. He lifted his hand to knock (scared or not, it would be impolite to simply try to open the door) when the door suddenly swung open and a shadowy figure stood before him. Japan reared back and covered his head with his arms, terrified of the possibility that his gaze would once again meet those cold, evil eyes.

"Japan? What is the matter?"

It was a woman's voice. Too old for a child. And reassuringly familiar.

Japan looked up and there was Hungary, watching him with concern.

"Ah, Hungary-san," he said. "My apologies. I did not realize…"

"I was just fixing my makeup," she said. "Some of it was starting to run and I didn't want my costume to get stained. Did I really frighten you that much?"

"It was not your fault, Hungary-san. I…I admit that I have been…on-edge, this evening. I fear that someone has been watching me."
It was embarrassing to admit, but Hungary just gave him a sympathetic smile.

"I am sure everything is fine," she said. "If you like, I can wait for you and we can go back into the party together."

Clutching at the offer like a lifeline, Japan thanked her and promised that he would only be a moment. He must have taken longer than he expected, because, when he exited the bathroom, Hungary was speaking to someone. A young, small, dark-haired, and violet-eyed someone.

Japan barely held back a scream.

"Aren't you just the cutest," Hungary said, playfully pinching Alaska's cheek as the little girl giggled. Then the child turned and waved innocently at him and Japan almost fainted.

"Hello, Mr. Japan," she said in a sweet voice that didn't fool him for a moment.

"Oh, you two know each other?" Hungary said, glancing between the nation and the state.

"Mr. Japan and I are being old friends, yes? But I have not seen him in long time until today."

Alaska gave a sad pout that had Hungary completely taken in by the ruse.

"Aw, I'm sure he hasn't meant to be away for so long."

No, Japan thought, I meant to be away from that demon for much, much longer. Forever, ideally.

Before anyone could add anything further to the discussion, a man's voice called out from upstairs.

"Hello! Could someone please help me?! I have no idea where I am!"

"Mr. Austria," Hungary said with a gasp. "Oh, dear. He and his poor sense of direction. Don't worry, Mr. Austria! Just stay where you are and I'll be right there!"

"H-Hungary-san," Japan said pleadingly as she began to hurry towards the nearby staircase. "I thought you were going to escort me back into the party?"

And keep me safe from the monster who wants to rip my face off and eat it, he left unsaid.

"Oh, right," she said and then gave an oblivious smile. "I am sure Alaska would be happy to walk you back."

Alaska giggled again and hugged Japan's side. Her touch was like he had put bare skin against frozen steel.

"There. Everyone's happy. I will see you back at the party Japan."

She turned and darted upstairs to find Austria before Japan could say another word of protest, leaving him alone with the creature whose grip had tightened painfully. A soft hissing sound, barely more than a whisper came from his side and Japan tried to stop himself from looking down. He tried to take a step away, as though he could simply ignore the tiny hellbeast, but she held him fast in her grip. He couldn't take the strain. He slowly lowered his gaze to the evil entity at his side and, oh, how he wished he hadn't.

Those eyes. Those dark, soulless, bloodthirsty eyes which promised nothing but suffering. They sucked him in like the center of a black hole.

Her face split into that same horrible smile with the rows of inhumanly-sharp teeth. He was alone
with her – with it – just as he had been back during that ill-fated campaign. How could someone as innocently childlike and naively optimistic and well-meaning as America have ever produced something that was so ruthless, so sick, so twisted up by bloodlust and mania? Japan knew that Alaska had once belonged to Russia, so perhaps that explained some of it, but in this awful moment of sheer terror, Japan would easily have begged to have it be Russia he was alone with instead.

"You never did answer my question, Mr. Japan," the monster said, still smiling. *So many teeth. All of them wrong. "Will you be my friend?"

And Japan's world went dark.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Don't worry, folks, our dear Japan will be fine…mostly.

Arizona is incredibly keyed-up about border control considering how many illegals try to cross over there. It's why so many Arizonans are armed to the teeth and why Arizona has some of the loosest gun laws in the country. Naturally, Arizona has some hard feelings towards her mother due to the immigration issue.

Concerning immigration, I am perfectly happy to accept those who want to come to the U.S. as long as they come here by legal means (we are a nation of immigrants, after all). I understand that many people want to come here because they have had problems in their home countries, but there is an order to how this process works. If we just throw open our borders, the nation will descend into chaos and we run the risk of not even being a country anymore as we try to support huge amounts of people without taking our resources and the wellbeing of our citizens and legal residents into account. Sorry for the rant, but I get a little worked up about things which, as far as I'm concerned, are just a simple question of common sense.

Yay, I found a way to introduce the Philippines! Her relationship with America is more a kind of sibling bond. I imagine her as having already been at least a teenager when she became America's territory and she was very slow to warm up to him, at first (as she thought he was going to be like everyone else who'd "owned" her); however, he earned her trust and admiration, and their friendship became strengthened when he not only kept his promise to come back and rescue her during WWII but when he granted her independence shortly afterwards. The states see her as an aunt, though the remaining territories, some of whom grew up with her, see her as a sister or even a maternal figure.

Guam and Northern Mariana Islands were invaded by Japan in WWII. Some Chamorro people from the Marianas cooperated with the Japanese and worked as translators for them while they occupied Guam. The Guamanians resented this and saw it as a betrayal, creating a rift between the two territories. So, you can also understand why Guam is Alaska's co-conspirator.

People in New Hampshire call Massachusetts "Taxachusetts" because of their differences of opinion on sales tax.

I picture West Virginia as having a very surly disposition because so many of her siblings like to make fun of her. She's a bit antisocial and only really allows Kentucky and Tennessee near her.
A lot of states don't like Utah because he's the Mormon capital of the U.S. and there is still a lot of anti-Mormon sentiment among traditional Christians (I know not everyone in Utah is Mormon, but a majority is). While I try not to judge others for their religious beliefs, I have to admit, Mormons kind of creep me out a little. No offense meant to any Mormons out there; I'm sure you're perfectly nice, decent people (perhaps it's the door-to-door evangelism, as I have a similar reaction to the Jehovah's Witnesses). Oh, and green Jell-O with carrots in it is, apparently, some weird Utah specialty (hey, whatever works for you, Utah).

"Cannibal Holocaust" is, as far as I can tell, the most psychotically messed up film of all time. It is an Italian movie, but it was banned in Italy (as well as many other countries) for a while because of the absolutely disgusting levels of gratuity and violence (including rape scenes), as well as the fact that seven animals were actually killed (some of them in brutal ways) in the making of the film. Some human death scenes in the film looked so realistic that the director was even arrested on suspicion of murder, though he was released when he provided proof that all the actors involved were still alive. Thankfully, I have never seen this movie and only know what I looked up. And I have no intention of ever seeing it.
"Seriouhsly, yuh put carrots in a dessert?" Illinois said.

"Carrots are healthy," said Utah. "I mean, I'd normally use pineapple, 'cause it tastes way better, but I found out that eatin' too much fruit can be just as bad for you as candy."

"Not like thaht stahped yuh from eatin' a fair share of the sweet stuff last night, Joe."

"I happen to enjoy gummy bears and almond joys."

"I thought yuh weren't s'posed tuh eat stuff with caffeine and sugar in it."

"You know perfectly well that my religious dietary laws are somewhat flexible. As long as I take things in moderation, I'm good."

"Does thaht include booze?"

"Now, now, let's not get carried away, Alphonse."

The two were sitting at the kitchen table while most of their siblings were scraping themselves up off the floor or still passed out on the sofas. The final film they'd all managed to get through before their group crash was *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which several states insisted they had to watch before Halloween was officially over. By the end, however, only a few states were left standing.

Illinois had slept through most of the previous day, so he was wide awake for the moviethon. Pennsylvania declared that sleep was "for the weak" and was only alert thanks to sheer willpower and, as she put it, her "badass military instincts." New York and his friend Hong Kong were both insomniacs, so they wouldn't have been able to sleep, regardless. Utah was awake and alert because he actually found a way to sleep with his eyes open and had implemented that skill during the more gruesome, disturbing, or explicit films his siblings had viewed so he wouldn't have to see anything that made him uncomfortable (he much preferred classic films with decent acting and no blood or naked women, thank you very much).

"Yo, would you two jag-offs shut up?" New York grumbled as he rested his head on the table and waited for the coffee to finish brewing. "My head feels like I got an eastbound train from Union Square goin' full-speed inside it."

"Don't be so lame, Mark," said Pennsylvania. "Joe, do we have any Oreo O's?"

"Are you sure I can't offer you some Special K, instead?" Utah said with a smile.

"Verdammt, I want my Oreo O's and I am not above using violence to get them."

"All right, all right, just please don't use such needlessly crass language, Sylvia."

"I will use whatever *verdammt* language I want. Now get me those *verdammt* Oreo O's!"

Utah just smiled again and got up to retrieve his sister's preferred cereal for her. She practically snatched it from him as he handed it to her and began pouring milk straight into it. Picking up a spoon, she started eating the entire box herself.
"You know, you really should moderate your consumption of that," Utah said. "If you eat too much sugar, it can give you diabetes."

"Fuck off, Joe," Pennsylvania said, shoveling another spoonful of cereal into her mouth. "I need to keep up my calorie intake because I work out like a champion."

Utah just smiled and looked for something less likely to induce a heart-attack. After all, he needed to save his carbs and calories for funeral potatoes or life wouldn't be worth living.

"How do you think Dad and his friends are this mornin'?" Utah said. "You know how those parties can get, after all."

"They're all probably passed out drunk or somethin', I dunno," Illinois said as he started fixing up some cups of coffee for himself and his siblings. Utah turned it down as he'd brought along a jar of Postum, which he claimed tasted better than coffee anyway.

"Maybe we should go help them?"

"And, I suppose, if some religious tracts happen tah find their way intah people's coat pockets, thaht's just coincidence, huh?" Illinois added with a knowing smile.

"Come now, Alphonse, would I ever abuse the opportunity to help someone else?"

Utah steadfastly ignored New York and Pennsylvania muttering about him being a "fucking goody-two-shoes."

"I say we just pop over and help out a little," Utah continued. "I was plannin' to help with the cleanup, anyway. I could even ask some of the others if they want to join us."

"I VOLUNTEER!" Tennessee's voice called out from over in the media room, eliciting a round of tired groans from her siblings. "Dang it," she muttered to herself. "Every time."

"Hey, what are, like, all these tickets stuck to my shirt?" California complained, having been woken from her rest. There was a pause before California gave an enraged shriek that made the other states groan again. "West Virginia, you, like, totally can't give me tickets for swearing! I don't fucking swear, you bitch!"

"Yuh know," said Illinois to his companions in the kitchen. "I get the feelin' thaht West is a little upset thaht Cali made us watch Wrong Turn, last night."

"God said to Noah, there's gonna be a floody, floody!"

Norway stifled a groan as the sound of someone's obnoxious singing reached his ears and his pounding head. Not that he would ever let it be known that he was in pain, especially from a hangover – he had an image to maintain, after all. Unfortunately, he'd taken a few too many sips of the akevitt he'd smuggled into the party – he'd needed it to deal with having to remain in close proximity to Denmark for a full evening – and now it felt like that time back in 1030 when he'd gotten an axe lodged in his head at Stiklestad.

"Well, Noah, he built him, he built him an arky, arky!"

"Will you be quiet?" Norway grumbled, trying not to raise his voice.

"Hmm?" the person responded, stopping nearby. "Oh, sorry about that, I didn't see you there. Let me
help you up."

Norway tried to open his eyes, but regretted it instantly when the light nearly blinded him. He didn't recognize the person's voice, only that it was a young man with an American accent. Likely one of America's numerous offspring, which made Norway very hesitant to accept any kind of help from him. Nightmares of that Delaware girl's driving had tormented him and Iceland for weeks after their encounter. However, the option of rejecting the offer of assistance was taken out of his hands as he was pulled up off the floor and set on his feet.

"Are you okay, sir?" the kid said in a bright tone.

Norway had the inexplicable urge to punch him. Perhaps it was because no one deserved to be so happy while Norway, himself, was suffering through a nasty hangover or because he just didn't like overly-cheerful people on general principle.

"I will be fine," Norway replied noncommittally. Honestly, though, in that moment, he felt as though nothing would ever be fine again.

"You're one of Dad's nation friends, aren't you?"

"'Friend' is a bit too strong a word. We are…not enemies."

"Well, a not-enemy of my dad is a not-enemy of mine. My name's 'Joseph Jones,' and I'm the state of Utah."

"How nice for you."

"Oh, you look a little shaky. Here, I've got some bottles of water with me."

Norway silently accepted an offered water bottle and downed its contents, hoping to alleviate the unpleasant taste in his mouth and, hopefully, stave off alcohol-related dehydration. After a few minutes, Norway risked opening his eyes again.

Blinking into the still rather painful morning light, Norway took in the grinning figure standing in front of him and immediately wished he was still passed out. For a moment, Norway wondered if Denmark had been secretly conducting cloning experiments (as if the world needed another Denmark running around). After shutting his eyes and gently rubbing his forehead, Norway looked again.

The boy did look an awful lot like Denmark, with his spiky blonde hair (which he had clearly tried to comb back with minimal success) and unassailably happy smile. However, his eyes were a smoky brown color and his clothes were much simpler, too—a starched white shirt with black slacks and a black tie—and he was noticeably younger than Denmark, maybe fourteen or fifteen in physical terms. Overall, the boy had a general air of "niceness" that left Norway feeling very suspicious…nice people always either had something planned or else got themselves and those around them killed by a simple matter of proximity.

"Yes, well, thank you for the water," Norway said shortly, his eyes darting to the doorway. "I must be going."

"Hej, Norge!" a familiar voice shouted and Norway had to suppress a grimace as Denmark, himself, swaggered into the room. "Guess what! America's handing out Halloween 2018 commemorative t-shirts. Check it out."

Norway blinked at the rather tacky, oversized orange-and-black shirt patterned with various
Halloween emblems that Denmark was wearing as if he were actually proud to be seen in it. If he knew what was good for him, Denmark had better not think that he could convince Norway to wear one, too.

"Hej, who's this?" Denmark said as he took notice of the state.

As Utah introduced himself and then began to chat, Norway honestly found it deeply disturbing how identical the boy's face was to Denmark's when the two morons stood there smiling at each other. Neither one seemed to realize the resemblance, however, which simply confirmed Norway's suspicions that the two must somehow be related in whatever strange way it was that nations' genetics worked, as there was no way that level of obliviousness wasn't a family trait.

"…and, you know, a lot of the Westerns that my sister California has made over the years were filmed in my Monument Valley…and I'm more than just desert, you know…and did you know that Nevada and I almost became the same state…and can I talk to you about this very informative book that will change the world and…"

Norway could hardly believe how attentive Denmark was being to Utah's rambling. He'd never known Denmark to be very good at listening as he was often too busy loudly making his own points, but he just smiled and nodded and occasionally gave a thoughtful "hmm" in response without interrupting.

Just…surreal.

Eventually, Utah decided to lead them to where the other nations were gathering for coffee and an assortment of foods and painkillers to treat their hangovers. Norway noticed, vaguely, that Utah had a faint glint of disapproval in his eyes and caught a whispered, "When will they learn?" If Norway didn't know better, he'd think that the boy didn't like alcohol. But that would be ridiculous, right?

"Mr. Denmark!" came a delighted, childlike squeal from across the room. Suddenly, a little girl came pelting over to them as fast as her legs could run. Brown skin, untamable black hair that stuck out in all directions, and eyes of a tropical blue. Norway had seen this little girl before as she had been under his and Denmark's care just over a hundred years ago, and she was the same now as she was the last time they saw her.

"Dansk Vestindien," Denmark said with an overjoyed smile as he hefted her up into his arms, causing her to giggle. Danish West Indies, or the "U.S. Virgin Islands" as she was now known.

"Good mornin', Charlotte," Utah said brightly.

"Joseph!" the little girl cried out, reaching over from her place in Denmark's arms to grab her foster-brother's face. "Did you know you look like Mr. Denmark?"

"Really?" Denmark and Utah said together, sharing a confused look as if they couldn't see what she could.

Norway just wanted to slap the two upside the head.

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After he'd dismissed himself to continue on his rounds, Utah thought he heard something coming from a nearby room. Figuring another of the nations might be in need of assistance, he decided to check it.

"Hidey-ho, who's in here?" he said, opening the door.
He paused at what he saw. Alaska and Guam were sitting at a little table with a plastic teapot and teacups. This was not, in and of itself, an unusual occurrence as the little girls often liked to play tea party (though they tended to use juice or chocolate milk or something instead of tea). What was odd was the obvious adult nation who had clearly been compelled against his will to join them.

While he had never met the nation, himself, Utah knew what Japan looked like from pictures his father showed him of the times they spent hanging out together. Japan was not in a good way, at the moment. The island nation was chalk white and looked as though he'd been through some unspeakably horrible and traumatizing experience, and was also currently bound to a chair and trembling. He glanced up when Utah entered, his dark eyes wide and pleading for rescue.

"Good mornin', Alisiya. Good mornin', Amista."

"Ah, hello, Big Brother Utah," said Alaska with her familiar, shark-like grin. "Little Sister Guam and I were just playing with our friend, Mr. Japan."

"Well, it's nice to know you both are making friends," he said, his smile never wavering. "But I do believe it's gettin' time for Mr. Japan to head home."

"Aw, really?" said Guam. "But Alisiya and I were having such fun with him."

"Yes, Big Brother Utah," Alaska added. "Can't he be staying with us forever?"

"I'm fairly certain that would be considered kidnappin'," Utah said patiently. "Besides, I'm sure Mr. Japan has a lot of important nation stuff he has to do."

Alaska and Guam turned to him with pouty faces and puppy-dog eyes, but Utah would not concede to their silent request. The girls grumbled a little but obediently began to untie Japan, who bolted as soon as he was free.

"No, don't run!" Utah called out after him. "They're drawn to movement!"

Like a red flag to a bull, Alaska's and Guam's eyes focused in on their target and they couldn't help but attempt to give chase. Utah immediately flung his arms out to catch them, only for the force to result in him being dragged behind them. Through it all, he somehow managed to maintain his cheerful demeanor.

"So, rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory, children of the Lord," Utah sang to himself as he strolled about the grounds of the house, ignoring the bandages which Illinois had given him when he found him covered in scratches, bruises, and bite marks he'd gotten in his attempt to rein in his little sisters.

It was at this time that Utah caught sight of Nevada's car parked on the lawn. Whistling to himself, he made his way over and peeked into the window. Inside, he saw Nevada and her boyfriend cuddled up under some blankets in the backseat and, considering their clothes were in the front, it gave him a pretty clear idea of what they'd been up to during the night. Still smiling as though nothing was bothering him about the situation, Utah tapped on the window.

He could hear some disgruntled muttering as the two lovebirds woke up and took notice of him.
Nevada's eyes instantly narrowed.

"So," Utah said loud enough to be heard by the two inside the car, "when are you two kids gonna stop livin' in sin and get married?"

"Why do yuh keep botherin' Eva?" Illinois said as he handed Utah an icepack for his black eye.

"Because I'm tryin' to save her soul," Utah said, smile still firmly in place. "Thank you," he added as he accepted the icepack. "Honestly. Runnin' around with a fella outside of marriage. She'll get a reputation if she keeps that up."

Illinois left it unsaid that Nevada had had a 'reputation' for quite some time and that he, Illinois, was not exactly a perfect little angel, either. Sometimes, Illinois wondered how his brother could still be so positive and idealistic, even after everything he and his people had been through over the years (some of which Illinois felt a bit of personal guilt for, not that he would ever admit it...other than that one apology in 2004 regarding what happened over a century ago at Nauvoo). Utah seemed to sincerely care about even the ones who hated him, like Missouri, Arkansas, and Nevada; in fact, the people that Utah should, by rights, at the very least dislike, he loved the most. For Illinois, who had more than a few chips on his shoulder where some of his siblings were concerned, it was sometimes a challenge to look past old enmities and work cooperatively with those who had wronged him.

Illinois had to admit that he kind of envied his brother's forgiving nature. That was probably the reason why Utah was the only one Illinois ever apologized to; not even their father received as much.

Suddenly, a terrified scream came up from the basement, which was followed by unholy sounds from some nightmarish dimension that mortal eyes dare not look on.

"No, get back," Rhode Island's voice echoed. "Va~ Back, I say!"

"Sounds like Rhodey went and summoned another unspeakable horror from thaht Necronommy- whatever of his," said Illinois. "Hey, Rhodes!" he shouted. "Keep it down, would yuh?!"

"Doesn't he know better, by now?" said Utah.

"Nah, thaht shrimp never learns."

"I fucking heard that!" Rhode Island shouted.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Someone please correct me on Illinois' accent, because I am certain that I'm butchering writing it (it's the best I've been able to do from watching accent videos and looking up web pages on it). I'm trying to do a blend of Chicagoan and other Illinois accents (as I know there's more than one), but it is really hard because I've never been. Oh, and someone please tell me if there are particular quirks about the Utah accent (I heard that the 't' gets dropped, but I wasn't sure) as I haven't found much about it.

Guam's human name, "Amista," from the sources I have read, means "fidelity/loyalty" in the Chamorro language. If anyone here knows Chamorro, please correct me if that is inaccurate.
"Akevitt" refers to aquavit or akvavit, which is a popular alcoholic drink in Scandinavia. I'm pretty sure Norway smuggles the stuff into parties because most other countries' alcohols are "too tame" by his standards.

Utah has the largest population of Danish-Americans (other than California) in the U.S. Back in 1850, Mormon missionaries achieved major success in gathering converts in Denmark. In fact, Danish Mormons were instrumental in settling Utah.

I don't know if you all can tell, but I really like the Nordics. They're just a little difficult for me to write sometimes because they don't have nearly enough screentime in the show as the rest of the Hetalia cast which leaves me unsure if I capture their personalities right. This is what I've inferred: Denmark is a precious goofball who doesn't know when to back down from a fight, Sweden is a cinnamon bun who looks like he can kill you but really just has communication problems, Finland looks like a cinnamon bun but can actually kill you and is also Santa Claus, Norway is gorgeous and filled with suppressed rage and can talk to trolls, and Iceland is shy and underappreciated but you had better freaking show him some respect and stop treating him like a child, damn it!

As an aside note, for this chapter, I read about how some places in West Virginia have anti-swearing laws and, since you mentioned West Virginia hates California, I just had to include a little reference to that.
Hippy cowgirl races coffins, plays just about every sport imaginable, and is also in the Air Force. And then it turns angsty.
And that's all I'm gonna say.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With the nations all safely returned to their homes and the impending horror of another election looming on the horizon, America felt he had to make a speedy getaway to evade the approaching storm. He needed to be in a place where no one would come and bother him about politics or ask him stupid and pointless questions he'd already answered a million times.

And what better place to get away to than the wild West?

That was why he'd tagged along with Colorado when she made her way back out home after the Halloween party dispersed. While there was nowhere that was completely isolated from the events stirring amongst the American people, Colorado was generally very removed from much of the stress going on because she spent most of her time getting high…on life by staying physically active and wandering around in the wilderness.

That was how America found himself standing at an overlook, a thermos of hot chocolate in his hand, as he watched his daughter ride a coffin down the mountain slope as if it were a sled. Giving Colorado an affirming cheer as she whipped past, her hair flying back in the wind, he heard her gleefully screaming like an excited little girl. The pack of dogs that she'd left waiting with her father barked frantically at her – unlike most of the other states, Colorado refused to go anywhere without her pets.

In truth, America often felt that Colorado would always be a child at heart, much like America, himself. She was undeniably hardworking when she wished, but she preferred living a free and unrestricted life. She didn't even live in a house most of the time, often camping out in a tent so she could see the stars at night and be near to nature. She did have a house, America had built it for her as he had for each of his children according to their designs, but she only stayed in it during the winter when it was too cold to remain in a tent (even then, she sometimes snuck out and pitched one in the snow).

"Did you see how fast I was going, Daddy?!" Colorado called out as she started trekking back up to him.

"I think you broke your speed record," America replied.

"Hey, I gotta be prepared for next year's Frozen Dead Guy Days."

"I don't remember that involving sledding downhill in your coffin."

"It doesn't. My team carries me through a course. I was just testing to see if this one's tough enough for next year's contest."
She walked past him, dragging the coffin behind her, over to where she'd parked her Jeep. After stowing the coffin, she pulled out a pair of mountain bikes; of course, how she was able to fit them, plus the coffin, plus snowboards, skis, tents, climbing gear, food and emergency supplies, and any number of other accoutrements into the back of her vehicle was a secret jealously guarded by all Coloradans.

"Time for something a little more relaxing," she said as she chucked a helmet at her dad and put on her own.

"Uh, can't we just watch movies or go to a concert or something, Clara?" America suggested weakly as he looked down the rugged terrain.

"Hey, you wanted to spend time with me and get away from the political headaches, Daddy. If you would rather sit around on your backside all day, just hop over to Wyoming's place. I'm sure you two can shove bison burgers in your faces and get even tubbier." She lightly prodded America in the stomach. While there was no genuine bite to her words, America puffed up a bit at the comment.

"Okay, okay," he said defensively. "You've made your point. I just…haven't been keeping up with my biking, lately."

"Boo, lame. C'mon, Daddy, where's your cowboy spirit gone?"

Glancing down the mountain again, America took a deep breath and strapped on his helmet. Father and daughter mounted their bikes and set off at frightening pace. They swerved and dodged and even hopped around and over jutting rocks and other obstacles obstructing their path. America felt his spirit lifting as their speed increased to break-neck levels, so fast that it almost felt like flying.

"You know, Daddy," Colorado said with smug little smile. "I actually made it illegal to hit obstacles, either on purpose or accidentally."

America threw a pointed glare at her as he lay on the hospital bed, his leg in a cast due to a little run-in with a rock during their bike race.

"I've read your laws, Clara," he said. "That only applies to ski slopes and, even then, only in Vail."

"I was teasing you, Daddy. For pity's sake, you need to get a sense of humor."

America pouted at that. He had an excellent sense of humor, thank you very much. He was the class-clown at the nations' meetings and frequently made up a bunch of crazy things just to get a rise out of his friends and colleagues.

He was cut off from retorting as one of Colorado's dogs leapt up onto the hospital bed with him and began licking his face. Only Colorado would have a pet-friendly hospital. America couldn't help but smile.

"So, Daddy, I was thinking," Colorado said. "Seeing as so many of my sibs are making friends with those nation buddies of yours, how about we invite some of the nations to Thanksgiving this year?"

America tensed at that. While Thanksgiving was, traditionally, a celebration of community, friendship, and cooperation, he had never actually invited any of the other nations to attend (except for Canada, of course, but he and his kids had their own Thanksgiving, so they didn't always come). It wasn't that America didn't want to invite his friends to Thanksgiving, it was just that there was a slight problem with that arrangement.
"Uh, Clara, I don't know if that's such a good idea," America said nervously.

"It'll be fine, Daddy," Colorado said, smiling and unconcerned. "I think it's Texas's turn to host it, this year. You know she makes a mean fried turkey."

And that just made things ten-times more likely to result in someone's death. America made a mental note to ensure he had the local emergency services prepared in case the worst should happen.

"I'm just not certain how the other nations will react to everything," America continued.

"Come on, Daddy, we all need to make changes. We don't wanna get stuck in a stagnant, outdated world where everything's all backwards and junk, do we?"

"No, I guess not. And it is pretty close to the next world conference that I'm going to be hosting. I can just arrange for it to take place in Houston."

"Great! So, I'll let Texas know we're gonna need to make some extra space at the table. You know, it's weird, but if I didn't know better I'd think Tex has been avoiding us. I haven't seen her in a month…maybe more."

Colorado leaned back in her chair, propping her feet up against the side of the hospital bed, and fished something out of her pocket that looked like a cigarette…but wasn't.

"Clara, dude," said America.

"What?"

"I know it's legal here, but could you not light that up in a hospital?"

While America would be hosting a world conference around Thanksgiving, there was still a NATO meeting arranged to meet in Belgium in the coming week. Seeing as Colorado had some time to spare, she dragged her father off to the Air Force Academy base where she kept a two-man fighter jet stationed (though she'd somehow found a way to renovate it so that there was room in the back for her pets). After getting one of the newbies to get some special flight gear for her beloved dogs, Colorado strapped on her suit and helmet and prepped the plane.

America had to admit that his kids certainly picked up on his love for flying. Colorado had a bit more of a flair for dramatic flying than some of the other states, though (except for Texas, who did flight stunts so crazy and dangerous they even gave America pause). She swirled and looped through the air, almost as though she was trying to get as close to heaven as possible. The flight was interrupted only when Colorado needed to duck down to refuel; thankfully they encountered a U.S. aircraft carrier while out over the Atlantic.

How his children were constantly able to circumvent international security measures, America had no clue. Regardless, Colorado managed to pull the aircraft into a Belgian airbase with no problems and even convinced the personnel to arrange for a car to transport them to the conference center.

America bursting into a conference room and shouting "Hey, dudes, hope I'm not late!" was far from unusual in the experience of the other nations. That he was followed by a young and unfamiliar teenager who was more than likely another one of his states was also becoming a strangely standard routine.

She had a similar face shape to her father, but that was all there was that they shared physically. Her
hair was long, windswept, and a deep, rich shade of red while her silver-grey eyes glinted brightly, almost silently challenging someone to come closer. She had changed out of her flight suit earlier and was currently wearing a fringed, leather vest over a blue flannel shirt and a pair of bell-bottom jeans. She had topped off her look with a light brown Western hat, onto which she had affixed a little pin in the shape of a blue columbine flower.

What made the scene so strange was that the two were followed into the meeting by a pack of dogs of various kinds. Germany face-palmed as numerous nations bolted from their seats to begin cooing over and petting the adorable animals. While Germany would admit, privately, that he also was very fond of dogs, this was highly distracting and unacceptable for the meeting.

"Everyone, back to your seats," he shouted, earning a round of disappointed groans from the other nations. "America, who is this girl with you and why did she bring these animals into the conference?"

"This is my daughter 'Clara Jones,'" America said simply. "The state of 'Colorado.' And she brought her dogs with her because, well, she just doesn't like to go anywhere without them."

"Wait, I've heard of her!" Prussia exclaimed, leaping out from his hiding spot under the table and causing Germany's blood pressure to spike. "Isn't she the one with legalized marijuana like Netherlands?"

Colorado's smile became a little tight at that. Certainly she liked pot and smoked it, but was that really the first thing everyone thought when they saw her? She wasn't even the first one to legalize it; that was her brother Washington, who also had to deal with the assumptions made because of it. It was bad enough at home with her siblings, especially the ones who criminalized marijuana in all cases, who would make fun of her for it or, in some cases, threaten to shoot the joint out of her hands if they ever saw her try to light one up on their land.

"Daddy," Colorado said, turning to America. "Seeing as you're busy, I'm gonna go for a walk so I don't disturb your little meeting."

"Okay, Clara," said America. "I'll see you later, all right."

Colorado nodded at him and tipped her hat to the nations – ignoring their surprised looks that she wasn't going to linger to possibly cause some kind of traumatizing disturbance, as some of her siblings had done – before turning and leaving, followed closely by her dogs. As she walked through the picturesque Belgian city in which the NATO conference was being held, Colorado began to fall into deep contemplation, as she often did when left alone for long periods of time.

"I wonder why it is that the nations were so shocked by our existence," she thought aloud. "It's not like we were hiding. And I certainly recognize plenty of them. I even remember being here before."

A couple of her dogs yipped in response.

"No, no, I don't think they're that obtuse. Perhaps it's because they just didn't want to see it. That we seem to them to be such an anomaly that it was easier to ignore our existence than to accept it."

Another round of yips came from the dogs, causing Colorado to smile.

"You guys are right, as usual. Since we're here today, I think there's a place where I've been long-overdue in visiting."
Unlike the last time Colorado was there, the red was from flowers. Poppies, to be precise. It was still and silent, save for the faint rustling of the wind over the fields and trees.

It was hard to believe, looking at the calm beauty of the land, that this spot had once been tainted by cannon fire, bullets, poison gas, barbed wire, and dead bodies. Colorado, herself, was not supposed to be there at the time, seeing as her father had been trying everything he could to keep his family out of the fighting in Europe and had told the states that they weren't to be directly involved in any more conflicts. Colorado was young, too young by any army's standards, but she and some of the other states had strapped on their boots and snuck out to join the war long before their father and his boss decided to officially bring their people into it.

They had gone and enlisted with foreign armies, which were desperately in need of fresh troops and willing to turn a blind eye to an underage girl disguised as an underage boy, so long as she was willing to point a gun at someone. She hadn't really understood what it was she was getting involved in, at the time. Before then, Colorado had been left out of wars, having not been born until after the Civil War and being much too young to fight in the Spanish-American War. There were times she wished she'd listened to her father and stayed home, just so she wouldn't have had to live through the sheer brutality and pain. But if she had, she wouldn't be who she was.

It was those experiences that shaped her. It was why she lived life so freely and would not allow herself to be confined when there was so much to see and do. Colorado often felt that she lived a new life every single day…a new life for each one lost.

"I see you couldn't stay away either, eh?" a smooth, soft voice said behind her and Colorado whipped around to see her cousin, Ontario, leaning up against a nearby tree. "A hundred years is a long time, eh?"

Colorado and the other states had fought alongside their cousins in both the World Wars. Whatever else one could say about either war, they had helped mend some of the damaged bridges between America and Canada and their respective children. It's hard to hold onto one's fears, enmities, and suspicions when you are carrying each other out of a maelstrom of explosions or helping each other to stitch body parts back on or crying on each other's shoulder when you realize one of your friends has been killed.

"I should've expected you to be here, Lawrence," Colorado said, moving to stand beside him. "Though I'm surprised that René isn't."

"Quebec mourns in his own way, Clara," said Ontario. "Just as you and I do, eh."

He stooped down for a moment to fish around his backpack, which had a large maple leaf emblazoned on it, and drew out two cans of beer. He passed one to his cousin.

"I suppose wine would be more suitable, but we both know our boys would've preferred this, eh?" he said with a sad smile.

The two cousins opened the cans and raised them up, silently offering a toast to the brave men who fell there.

"Here's to you, my friends," Ontario said, taking a drink.

"In Flanders fields the poppies blow," Colorado began, recalling the famous words of John McCrae, one of Ontario's people who had been with them on the battlefield so long ago.

"Between the crosses, row on row," Ontario continued.
"That mark our place; and in the sky…"

"That larks, still bravely singing, fly…"

"Scarce heard amid the guns below."

The cousins continued to recite the famous poem, coming together to say the final line: "We shall not sleep, though poppies grow…In Flanders fields."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I felt it was appropriate for Colorado (the Centennial State) to be introduced for the hundred-year anniversary of the Armistice. During WWI (and later in WWII), many Americans volunteered to join the Allied military before the U.S. officially declared war, including a number of men from Colorado.

Colorado has the lowest rate of obesity in the entire U.S.; it's probably because most of the folks out there are really physically active. Hence why Colorado teases her father about his weight and taunts him for getting whiny about exercise, especially because she just loves sports of any kind. She does like movies and concerts, too, though. Also, recreational marijuana is legal in Colorado and it's becoming a part of the culture.

Nederland, Colorado has a festival every March called "Frozen Dead Guy Days" in honor of a cryogenically frozen man, Bredo Morstøl, whose family brought him over from Norway and stored his body in a shed.

Colorado is one of the top two most dog-friendly states. Of course, I don't know if there's such a thing as a pet-friendly hospital (probably not), but, if there is, Colorado would definitely have one.

I am trying not to be too political in this story, because I know I probably have readers from both ends of the political spectrum, but I will say this: Politics suck. There need to be limits on how much people can spend on campaign funds (seriously, the millions of dollars wasted on campaigning could've been put to way better use like, say, feeding and sheltering the homeless, maybe?). There need to be term limits for Congress and an end to the political class. Folks need to actually pay attention to what the candidates are saying rather than the preachy campaign ads. And, for goodness' sake, people, stop going into other people's states to push them into supporting a particular candidate (seriously, guys, you should be more focused on your own elections, stop telling me how to vote in mine).
I Volunteer

Chapter Notes

And now, the beginning of the Thanksgiving arc.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Why did she always have to open her fool mouth?

Every single time someone needed a bit of help, Tennessee got this knee-jerk reaction to start waving her hand and saying that she would do it. Her siblings even used to take advantage of it in order to get out of chores they hated until America made them stop – of course, they always found loopholes. Still, at least this wasn't too much of a burden, volunteering for a mail-run.

When the word went out that some of the nations (which, for the states, meant all the nations) were getting invited to Thanksgiving, she had been the first one to step up to the plate to offer to deliver them. The only others to agree to help her out were Georgia, who wrote each invitation by hand as she had the most elegant handwriting, and West Virginia, who drew up a delivery plan for Tennessee to follow and helped her get all the invitations assembled and organized.

"And make sure you stay warm, darlin'," said Georgia. "You know how cold it gets over there. Why, it's even gettin' rather chilly at my place, so there's no tellin' how bad it'll be in Europe."

"Aw, don't worry 'bout me, Georgie," Tennessee said with a wide, eager smile. "This ain't my first rodeo."

"I know, Sunny. Just call it a big sister's worries."

"I'll be fine. I always am."

A derisive mutter came from South Carolina, who was, at that time, curled up on a nearby couch and doing the crosswords.

"Jessie, darlin', don't talk in an undertone like that," said Georgia. "It ain't ladylike."

"Oh, you wanna know what I said?" South Carolina replied. "Let me put it this way. What's a nine-letter word for 'Yankee-lovin', backstabbin' turncoat'?"

"If you got somethin' to say to me, sweetheart," Tennessee said, her smile turning sharp. "How's 'bout you say it to my face?"

"Easy, now, ladies," said Georgia. "We're all family, here. Uh, Tennessee, honey, shouldn't you be gettin' on the road, now?"

"Right." She threw a short glare at where South Carolina was seated before turning towards the door. "I'll see ya'll later."

Georgia let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding when Tennessee closed the door behind her. She then straightened up and turned a serious frown on South Carolina as she yanked the newspaper out of her hands.
"Hey, what was that for?" South Carolina snapped.

"You have got to stop antagonistizin' Sunny," Georgia said sternly.

"Tch, it ain't my fault she's a dang flip-flopper. I swear, sometimes I think that girl got dropped on her head, 'cause it can't stay on straight."

"Jessie, for pity's sake, this senseless feudin' has got to stop. It's even worse than what you got goin' with Kitty. Or what Sunny has goin' with Kitty. Or even what Washington's got goin' with Kitty."

"Well, what about your hatred of Florida?"

"Seriously, Jessie, who doesn't hate Florida? Personally, I think Florida hates himself, too."

"You both realize I am right here, si?" Florida said with his normal calm, cheery tone.

"Actually, we was hopin' to put your presence out of our minds," said South Carolina. "Maybe then we could get some peace and quiet, for a change."

"Oh, all right. I am sorry I interrupted your tranquility."

"Say, Florida," Georgia said, trying to suppress a smug smile. "How're the election problems goin'?"

"You mean my 'electile' dysfunction? I should ask you the same thing, mi hermana."

It took every ounce of her strength as a proper Southern lady to keep Georgia from slapping her brother for making such a stupid joke and for his insinuations that her election problems were anywhere near on a par with his.

"Bruder, you cannot keep sneaking into the meetings," Germany told Prussia sternly as the two walked out of an office building together.

"Awesome people can do whatever they want, West," Prussia said with his usual grin.

"You are not supposed to be there, Gilbert. I have told you countless times that-" Germany was cut off when he suddenly found himself face-to-face with a teenage girl who had clearly been waiting in position for the two brothers to walk right into her path.

"Hey there," she said with a wide grin that confirmed in an instant that she was yet another of America's wayward offspring.

She looked a good deal like America, too. In fact, had America been slightly younger and a female and didn't have glasses, she could easily have passed for him. She had short, blonde hair with a cowlick like America's, blue eyes with a hint of grey in them, and very lightly tanned skin.

"You fellers 'Germany' and 'Prussia'?" she asked.

"Don't answer that, Bruder!" Prussia said frantically. There was a glint of fear in his red eyes which Germany found very unusual for his loudmouthed and headstrong older brother. "It's a trick!"

"What are you doing?" Germany said with a sigh as he resigned himself to another moment of Prussia's strangeness.

"Just back away slowly. No sudden moves."
"Is he some kind of moron?" the teenage girl asked Germany.

"Ja, and I have to live with it, every day," Germany said.

"Well, shoot, you have my sympathies, sir. I'm Susanna, by the way. The state of Tennessee. But you can call me 'Sunny.'"

"Bruder," Prussia tried again. "Don't let her fool you. The moment you least expect it, she'll stab you the throat with a sharpened toothbrush. Just like at Argonne!" Prussia froze and then looked nervously at Tennessee, who was watching him with a calculating expression. "Scheiße. The Awesome Me just gave it away."

"Hey, I remember you," Tennessee said. "You were in that machine gun nest I raided with Sergeant York." She gave him a wide, friendly smile. "How've you been?"

Germany had never thought anyone or anything could terrify his brother. Even when Russia was involved, Prussia normally managed to maintain his usual arrogant demeanor…mostly. Germany then thought back to World War I and the events at Argonne. He remembered Prussia stumbling back to base camp, riddled with bullet and knife wounds, looking as though he'd looked into the very face of Death, itself.

Then Germany looked back at the cheery-faced American girl. While Germany did not consider himself to be convinced of a person's character by appearances alone, he had to admit that Tennessee did not look dangerous – certainly not dangerous enough to merit such a response from Prussia. In fact, Germany was reasonably certain that she wasn't an immediate threat, even if she was hiding a second personality as Germany had witnessed from some of the girl's siblings.

"I am Germany," he said calmly. "This is my brother Prussia."

"What is wrong with you?" Prussia hissed at him. "Do you want to end up with a bayonet in the back of your skull?"

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet ya properly, Mr. Germany, Mr. Prussia," Tennessee said. "I'm here to give you this." She handed a sealed envelope to Germany. "Sorry to run, but I've got more to deliver. I'll be seein' ya!"

With that, she turned and skipped off.

"I am amazed that so many of America's children are actually rather polite," Germany thought aloud.

"She wasn't so polite when she smashed mein awesome legs with a lead pipe," Prussia grumbled. "Not that you seem to care about mein awesome self's suffering."

Germany ignored him and opened the envelope, withdrawing the colorful invitation inside.

"America has invited us to his family's Thanksgiving holiday," Germany said. "That is odd. I have heard him mention the holiday before, but, as far as I know, he's never invited other nations to it."

"This is so unfair. America is going to be throwing an awesome party and the Awesome Me doesn't want to go because that crazy girl might be there."

"Bruder, I do not think she intends us any harm. The last time you saw her was during a war and you, yourself, were attempting to kill her and her soldiers."

"You weren't there, West. You didn't see the look in her eyes. That girl is a killer. She's like that
Hungary, herself, was helping Austria get back to his hotel – as he'd gotten lost again – when the bubbly, blonde American state popped up and handed the two of them their own invitations to the Thanksgiving party.

"Oh, how kind," Hungary said with a sweet smile. "Of course we'll come. Right, Austria?"

"I suppose," Austria said stiffly. "Though I am astonished that your father has invited us. I did not think he considered us close enough friends to invite to a family gathering."

"Aw, no, sir," said Tennessee. "Thanksgivin' ain't a family holiday. It's about community. And eatin' pie and arguin' with folks about politics. 'Cause no holiday is complete without someone gettin' punched in the face over a disagreement on healthcare policies."

Austria was not exactly enthusiastic about that little revelation of what was to be expected at America's Thanksgiving festivities, but Hungary seemed interested and it was very difficult to tell her 'no.'

The Baltics were cowering as Russia hovered over them. He wasn't doing anything particularly menacing, other than smiling and making idle chit-chat. Poland was also with them and was the only one not cringing, as he was too busy making snarky retorts to Russia's attempts to be sociable. Poland had been about to respond with a cutting retort to Russia's suggestion that they all go out to dinner together as friends, "just like old times," when Tennessee burst in through the nearby window.

"Evenin', gentlemen," she said with a toothy grin. "Mr. Lithuania, it's nice to see you again."

"Oh, hello, Sunny," Lithuania said, his earlier fear of Russia disappearing. After all, it is hard to be scared when you have friends present who have massive guns and have promised to shoot the next person who tries to annex you or impose a Communist government in your land. "I have not seen you in a while. How have things been in Nashville?"

"They've been great! I've been branching out my music industry from country. I've even got a hip-hop scene goin'."

"Liet," Poland said, his eyes narrowing. "You, like, never mentioned you knew America's states."

"Oh, well, I did work for America for a while. It was impossible not to encounter at least one of the states every day."

"Friend Lithuania," Russia said, resting a hand heavily on Lithuania's shoulder and smiling rather coldly. "I am being very unhappy that you did not tell me that Friend America has such the pretty family."

"Why would anyone tell a dang Commie anythin'?" Tennessee said, her own smile very fixed.

The large, Slavic country and the teenage, American state stared each other down in a way very much reminiscent of how Russia and America, himself, would stand off against each other whenever their Cold War tension reemerged. Estonia and Latvia were shaking as they expected a brawl to ensue, while Poland was still glaring at Lithuania for keeping him in the dark about what he knew about America's family. Lithuania, himself, hoping to diffuse the situation, decided to speak up.
"Uh, Tennessee…Sunny, is there a reason you dropped in to visit?" he said.

"Right, almost forgot," Tennessee said, breaking the uncomfortable moment and turning to the large mail sack she had dragged in with her. "Daddy's sendin' me 'round with invites to Thanksgivin' dinner. I got one for everyone…even the Commie," she added with a sharp look at Russia, her tone decidedly unhappy.

As soon as Tennessee opened the sack to retrieve the invitations, however, a low hissing sound emerged from within it. In the dark of the sack, a pair of glowing, violet eyes shone. Then, without warning, a blue and brown blur shot out of the sack and charged straight at Russia. Alaska, dressed in her usual puffy, blue Winter coat, lunged for Russia with sharp teeth bared. Russia brought a hand up, blocking the attack and resulting in Alaska's teeth sinking into his wrist, drawing a stream of blood.

"Aw, it is little Alaska, again," Russia said, completely unfazed while the others watched on in horror. "You will become one with Mother Russia again, Da?"

The blazing fury in Alaska's eyes doubled and she pressed her teeth even more sharply into his wrist, as if intent on ripping his hand off.

"I swear, that gal can come out of the woodwork if she wants to," Tennessee muttered. "Allie, sweetheart, I think you should let go of the Ruski, there. He might give you Commie germs."

Alaska growled slightly but released her grip on Russia, dropping lightly to the floor.

"Rotten deadbeat," she said with a final glare at him. "One day I will be strong, powerful state and will finally overthrow you for the glory of my Ataata."

Russia blinked at her with a look of astonishment on his face. Alaska, however, simply turned and caught sight of Lithuania, causing her to smile and bound over to him, wrapping her arms around the Baltic country's legs in a warm hug.

"Mr. Lithuania, I have missed you," she said.

"Ah, hello, Alisiya," he said, hugging her back and giving her a fond smile.

"You will be coming to Thanksgiving party, yes?"

"Of course."

"And you will help me in world domination for democracy?"

"Uh…you'll have to ask Mr. America about that."

Russia watched the scene with his dark aura falling around him. Though his childlike smile never faltered, there was a distinct note of malice to it. He barely even seemed to register when Tennessee roughly shoved his own invitation into his hands, as she had resumed her initial task of distributing the letters amongst the nations in the room. The Baltics knew the signs, though…Russia was furious that he'd been rejected and that someone even had the nerve to do so right to his face.

"Right, well, we best be goin'," Tennessee said, taking Alaska by the hand and leading her towards the door. "Lots more invites to deliver."

"Liet, I still, like, can't understand why you didn't, like, tell me that you knew," Poland said once the two states had left.
Lithuania just smiled, internally feeling rather victorious, and said something he'd waited a long time to say to Poland, "You know, Poland, I wish you could see the look on your face right now. It's hilarious."

"Like, rude much?"

"Friend Poland has good point, Lithuania," Russia said, once more looming ominously behind Lithuania, who began to feel nervousness creep back into him. "Perhaps you can explain why you never thought to share such important information with us?"

Alaska proved to be very keen in helping Tennessee finish distributing the invitations. Mostly because it allowed her an opportunity to frighten the recipients of the letters by popping out of unexpected places.

Paraguay had to catch poor Uruguay as she fell back in a faint when Alaska jumped out from behind a bush, threw the invitations at them, and shouted a verbal invitation in Inupiat that sounded threatening but was actually perfectly innocent.

Romano screamed and started pleading for Alaska not to hurt him when he opened his suitcase to find her inside, holding one of his guns that he'd smuggled in, only for Veneziano to appear and, completely unfazed, accept the invitation for them both (as he was still convinced from America's words during Halloween that Alaska was actually harmless).

Serbia did not take kindly to Alaska choosing to drop down on him when he opened his closet and forcing the invitation into his face. In fact, he was so outraged that he not only screamed at Alaska, he even went so far as to insult America for "raising a little savage." Alaska did not appreciate what he said and so decided to make her displeasure known – Serbia would not be seen for several weeks until he was discovered bound and gagged in the basement of his home by a concerned Montenegro.

When she delivered the letters to Australia and New Zealand, though, they took her surprise attack – which involved Alaska jumping onto Australia's back and nearly strangling him as she hugged him around his neck – with surprising good humor. Australia even said that Alaska was 'as adorable as a baby dingo.' New Zealand, completely unshaken by the strange scene, simply asked if they were expected to bring anything to the party.

"Well, that's the last of them," Tennessee said as she and Alaska walked away from a trembling Japan who had screamed and attempted to flee the instant he saw Alaska, only to be caught and rather forcefully given his invitation.

"No, not quite," Alaska said, holding up one last envelope. "We forgot to invite Mr. England."

"Gosh-darnit, you're right, Allie. Why, he's the guest of honor. If it hadn't been for him drivin' off his own people for refusin' to worship Jesus the way his king told 'em to, we wouldn't even have a Thankgivin'. Those poor Yankee New Englanders would be heartbroke if we didn't make sure he was there."

England opened his hotel room door to find himself face-to-face with a teenage girl who looked like she could very well have been a genderbent America. Seeing as she was accompanied by the unholy hellspawn that was Alaska, England tried to slam the door and pretend no one was there. However, Alaska stopped the door from shutting by slamming a knife into the frame.

"Hello, Mr. England," she chirped innocently. "Big Sister Tennessee and I have something to be
"Not interested," he said.

"You don't even know what it is," said Tennessee.

"I don't have to. Those looks you both have on your faces...I've seen them before whenever your father was up to something. I won't be taken in."

"Well, how do you like that, Allie?" Tennessee said to Alaska, her tone highly offended. "How horribly rude."

"Very rude, Big Sister Tennessee," said Alaska.

"Here we are, taking time out of our busy schedules to give invitations to Daddy's Thanksgivin' party, only to be turned away 'fore we can even get a word in. And here I always thought that British fellers was s'posed to be gentlemen."

"At least Mr. Scotland, Mr. Ireland, Miss Ireland, and Mr. Wales were nice."

"True."

"Wait just a bloody second," England snapped, throwing open the door, his expression thunderous. "You invited my damned brothers and sister before me? I'm the reason America even has that blasted holiday."

"Yeah, Artie, because everyone was so t'ankful to get away from ya!" the Republic of Ireland called from up the hall, clearly having overheard what was happening.

"Shut up, Erin!" He looked back at Tennessee and practically ripped the invitation out of her hands. "Fine, I'll go to your damned, made-up American holiday. But it's only because I need to prove a point."

With that, he slammed the door. Then remembered that Alaska's knife was still lodged in the doorframe. He removed the knife, quietly handed it back to Alaska, and then shut and bolted the door.

"I think that went well, don't you, Allie?" said Tennessee.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Tennessee is known as the "Volunteer State" because of how many volunteer soldiers from the state helped in America's historical wars, starting with the War of 1812, and their particular importance in the Mexican-American War, especially when a group of brave Tennessee men (which included the famous frontiersman Davy Crockett) fought alongside the Texans defending the Alamo.

Tennessee was the last state to leave the Union in the Civil War and the first to return to it. It also provided a substantial number of troops for both sides (second only to Virginia for the Confederacy and more than any other Confederate state for the Union). Because of this, I think some of the other Confederate states consider her a sellout (also Tennessee hate North Carolina because her eastern side used to be under NC's control
until the people got sick of NC government and decided to break away).

West Virginia helped in the restructuring of the American postal system with the introduction of RFD (Rural Free Delivery), thanks to Postmaster General William Wilson.

In WWI, Alvin C. York (often called "Sergeant York") from Tennessee led an attack on a German machine gun nest, killing 25 enemy soldiers and capturing 132. York had a force of seven men under his command for the attack, as the other nine had been killed or wounded prior to the attack.

I imagine Tennessee is a sweet girl and, like most Southerners, very polite. But if you make her mad or try to fight her on the battlefield, she will mess you up.

What always gets me is when people think Thanksgiving is about family. It's actually meant to be a celebration of community and cooperation. After all, the whole point is that very different people are supposed to put aside their differences for a day in order to share a meal.

Yes, I had to bring back Alaska. She's so adorably crazy and violent. Poor Russia, why don't people want to become one with you?
And now, Part II of the Thanksgiving arc: Travel.
As I have said before, it is not my intention to offend anyone.

Although they knew America was much more than just New York City, Los Angeles, and D.C., many of the nations still failed to fully register just how big the U.S. actually is. You see, if one doesn't count Russia as part of Europe (and, let's be fair, Russia has always been more like a continent unto himself), the United States alone was almost the same size as all of Europe. But even after so long and even after learning that they couldn't simply drive from Point A to Point B as quickly as they had assumed, the other nations still failed to fully grasp the concept.

That was how England, France, Germany, Japan, China, Russia, and the Italies ended up lost in the middle of the desert.

They had made the mistake that many people who weren't familiar with the true breadth of the U.S. frequently made. Even those within the group who had gone on the G-7 trip to Wyoming had forgotten that America, in terms of land, was larger than all of them, except for Russia. You see, having learned that America had changed the location of the conference from the usual building in New York City to Houston, Texas in order to ensure people could make it to his Thanksgiving party, but figuring it wasn't worth the extra hassle to change the tickets they had all already purchased or to purchase tickets for an additional flight, they had figured they could make the journey by car (opting to all travel together in a large van) to save a bit of money.

It was a hellish experience. Stuck in a small space with people they could barely tolerate on the best of days, driving kilometer after kilometer, not understanding the road signs, getting confusing directions from locals, and taking the wrong exit which had led them very, very far off their route and into the Oklahoma panhandle, where their van promptly broke down. It was stark, dusty, and, to be honest, terrifyingly isolated. The closest thing the western and central European countries in the group had by way of comparison was No Man's Land.

Ironically, their vehicle happened to break down right in front of a billboard that read: *No Man's Land, Oklahoma Panhandle.*

"We~ Germany, we're going to die," Italy said tearfully. "We're lost in a big, scary desert with no way out!"

"Italy, we are going to be fine," Germany tried to reassure his friend.

"Shut up, Potato-Bastard!" Romano screamed. "We're lost in the middle of a God-damned desert and it's your fault!"

"Aiyah," China said with an annoyed roll of his eyes. "You Westerners are weak, aru. This isn't anywhere near as desolate as the deserts I have back home."

"What does comparing it to other places matter?" England snapped. "It doesn't change the fact that
we're stranded in the middle of bloody nowhere with no way of getting help!"

"I can't believe I'm saying this," said France worriedly. "But England is right. Mon dieu, the world must be coming to an end."

The group continued to argue about what to do until Germany finally snapped and yelled at them all to shut up.

"This bickering will do nothing to solve our problem," he said sternly. "Now, everyone, remain calm. I am assuming someone brought a cellphone."

"My battery is dead."

"I still don't know how to work mine."

"You cannot possibly expect to get reception in the desert."

"Ve~ Mine locked me out."

"I am beginning to feel somewhat dizzy."

This last comment was given by Russia who, dressed in his normal heavy coat and scarf, suddenly fainted from the heat. While China reluctantly attempted to provide first aid, Germany got one of the other nations to turn over the only functioning cellphone.

"The signal is weak," he said after checking it. "Perhaps, if I can get higher up, I may be able to get through to someone."

"Well, Potato-Bastard, we are in a flat desert," said Romano. "What, are you gonna fly up into the air or something?"

"Ve~ Romano, don't be so mean to Germany," said Veneziano. "He's just trying to help. Ve~ Germany, what about that billboard? Is that high up enough?"

"Perhaps," said Germany. "Here, someone give me a boost."

"Ve! All right. You are a good person and people say nice things about you."

"...Not a morale boost, Italy."

Eventually, Germany managed to climb up to the top of the billboard. Balancing carefully on the narrow structure, Germany began to check for a signal. Then, as if sensing the wishes of the nation holding it, the cellphone began to ring. Seizing the chance, Germany answered it.

"Yo, Japan, you there, buddy?" came the familiar voice of a certain world superpower.

"America, thank Gott," Germany said.

"Germany? Sorry, I must've dialed the wrong number. I was trying to get Kiku."

"Wait! America, don't hang up! We are in serious trouble. We went the wrong way driving to the conference and have broken down in someplace called the 'Oklahoma Panhandle.'"

"Wow, you really got off-track, didn't you, dude? Have you tried hitch-hiking? I find that's pretty effective and I only run into serial killers about forty percent of the time."
"America, this is no joking matter! We are stranded in the middle of a desert!"

"Okay, dude, just calm down," America said patiently. "I know someone who can help you out. Do you have a precise location?"

Germany described everything he could about where they were, right down to his estimation of their geographic coordinates.

"All right, Germany," America said. "I'll get this through. With luck, I'll have someone out there in about thirty minutes to an hour. When you see a truck pull up with the words 'Nash's Auto Repair' written on the door, you'll know."

"Danke," said Germany.

"Oh, and tell Allen that I said 'hi.'"

Before Germany could ask who 'Allen' was, America hung up.

Germany was left to hope that America would be successful and not leave them to die in a desert. He edged down the side of the billboard and handed the cellphone back to Japan. After Germany explained what happened, the nations sat around impatiently as they waited for the arrival of the truck from the repair shop. England and France became increasingly agitated, as they usually did when stuck in a place with each other for too long, and seemed increasingly close to starting a fistfight. China continued to make sure Russia didn't die from the heat, occasionally jabbing his pressure points a little more sharply than strictly necessary. Italy attempted to lift everyone's spirits by singing, telling stories, or trying to play I Spy, only for the others to lose their tempers and snap at him.

Finally, after what felt like ages, a cloud of dust on the horizon heralded the arrival of a banged-up, old, blue tow truck. Printed on the side were the words: Nash's Auto Repair. The nations all heaved sighs of relief.

The driver door opened a man stepped out. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and rather intimidating. He had dusky skin, an aquiline nose, narrow brown eyes, and long, dark brown hair. He was wearing a simple, blue, oil-stained uniform, on which was sewn a nametag that said his name was "Nashoba."

England and France shifted a bit in nervousness as they realized the man was an American Indian. The two nations did not exactly have the best track record with America's native people, England considerably more so than France, and they couldn't help but feel as though the man's gaze was fixed specifically on them, as though he knew exactly who they were.

"I take it that you're the ones Alfred called me about," Nashoba said.

"Ja," said Germany. "Our car broke down and-"

Nashoba just held up a hand.

"I got it," he said. "I prefer to see the problem myself." He then turned back to the truck and called out, "Hey, Al, get the tools!"

"Sure thing, boss," a boy's voice replied.

The passenger door opened and a boy of maybe thirteen hopped out. Like Nashoba, he had a somewhat dark complexion, brown eyes, and brown hair, though the boy's hair was short and
windswept and had the faintest hints of red where the sun hit it. Like Nashoba, he was wearing a 
blue uniform with a nametag, with his reading: Allen.

"Oh, you are Allen," Germany said once he saw the boy's nametag.

"Yes, sir," Allen said brightly.

"Alfred asked me to say 'hi' to you for him."

"Oh, you're Dad's friends? Nice to meet'cha. I'm Allen T. Jones. The state of Oklahoma. Where the 
wind comes sweepin' down the plains. Also, maker of the best dang red velvet cake and pecan pie in 
the whole U.S., no matter what Arkansas and Texas say."

"Allen, the tools," Nashoba said insistently as he began to inspect the car.

"On it, boss."

Oklahoma quickly dashed to the back of the truck and got out the toolbox. The man and the state 
carefully looked the car over, noted to themselves what was wrong, and got right to work while the 
nations watched on. Oklahoma would frequently look up and start talking at the nations in a very 
fast-paced and almost excessively friendly manner about whatever happened to enter his mind, 
which did more to make them uncomfortable than it did to assuage their worries about the situation.

"Here's your main problem," Nashoba said after a while. "You've got a faulty battery. Whoever 
rented you this car was either an idiot or a jackass. Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't break down 
sooner. Alfred told me you lot are supposed to be headed to Houston. Well, good luck with this 
piece of junk."

"Is it really that bad?" France said. "I do not know much about cars, but-"

"If you don't know much about cars, then you don't really have much to argue with me about. And 
you ain't going anywhere on this."

"Now wait a second, aru," China spoke up. "We have to be at an important conference. Can't you 
just-"

Nashoba silenced him with a look. China couldn't help but be reminded of Mongolia, back in the 
days when Mongolia was a force to be reckoned with as the Golden Horde. It was a kind of cold, 
hard look that seasoned warriors often had that basically commanded attention from those around 
them and more or less implied that someone should shut up or else something very unpleasant would 
happen.

"With all due respect, buddy," Nashoba continued in a firm tone. "This car won't be moving anytime 
soon. Now, if you all had waited for me to finish, I was going to say I can have someone get you to 
the train station, which is your best option at the moment if you want to make it to your conference 
on time."

"What're you thinkin', boss?" said Oklahoma.

"Call in Galegenoh to bring the van around. He's not doing anything important."

"I thought he was reviewin' the entries for the next Sundance Film Festival?"

"Like I said. Nothing important."
"All right, I'll go get him on the radio."

Oklahoma went back over to the truck and pulled out an old-fashioned CB radio. He put on a set of headphones and then began to fiddle with the knobs and dials on the device.

"Breaker, breaker, this is Eagle One calling Stag Three," he said. "Come in, Stag Three. Over."

While Oklahoma was busy talking, Nashoba went ahead and hooked the car up to the tow-hook on his truck. After a moment, though, he turned and looked at the nations.

"I've been meaning to ask," he said. "What's with the passed-out fat guy?" He pointed at the unconscious form of Russia.

"Not fat…" came a weak response from the large nation, who was not quite as unconscious as believed. "…Big-boned."

"He was wearing a heavy coat, aru," said China. "He has heat-exhaustion."

"What, in this?" Nashoba said incredulously, holding up a hand as if testing the air. "This is nothing. Not even any humidity. I used to live on the east coast and, believe me, that was much worse."

"If I might ask a question of my own," England said. "How is it that you know Alfred?"

Nashoba gave him a searching look that left England feeling very much as though he was being put through some kind of test. A test he couldn't help but sense that he was failing.

"Let's just say that Alfred and I share a long history," Nashoba said. "In fact, I should be the one asking you how you know him."

Before England could respond, Oklahoma called out, "Right, he's on his way!"

Oklahoma hastily put away the CB equipment and, with a wide smile, began enthusiastically shaking the hands of each of the nations, including that of a barely-coherent Russia, with an almost painful grip.

"Well, I must say, it's been a pleasure meetin' you nice folks," he said. "And I hear I'll be seein' ya'll again at the Thanksgivin' party. I hope you can handle crowds, 'cause we always get a big turnout. After all, it's not like it's just me, Dad, and my sibs. That'd just be a small, sit-down supper. Not that I'd mind a quiet, little thing like that, but, the way I see it, I tell you, it's best to go big or go home when it comes to holidays like Thanksgivin' or the Fourth of July, 'cause they really are-"

"Kid, breathe," Nashoba said.

"Oh, sorry, boss. You know how it is."

Soon enough, an old van pulled up to where the group was waiting. On the back of the van was a large sticker which read: Proud to be Cherokee. The window of the driver's side rolled down and a man who appeared very impatient looked out at them. Like Nashoba, the man was clearly American Indian; though, unlike the mechanic, he'd shaved part of his head so that his dark hair fell straight down in the back and stuck up a little on the very top.

"Come on, people, move it," he said. "I've got places to be, too, you know."

"Just get them to the train station, Galegenoh," Nashoba said calmly. "Then you can go back to your television."
"It's independent films and they are *art*, Nashoba!"

There was a sudden flash and everyone turned to look at Japan who was holding his camera and looking very embarrassed.

"My apologies," he said. "I have been trying to restrain myself, but I couldn't help it."

"Do I look like a fucking tourist attraction to you?!" Galegenoh shouted.

"I am sorry. It was not my intention to offend but I have a compulsive need to take pictures of everything and everyone when I travel."

"Don't worry about my brother," said Nashoba. "He's just...sensitive."

"I have every right to be," Galegenoh continued. "After years of damn tourists pointing their fucking cameras at me and going 'Ooh, look, it's a real Indian' and asking me stupid questions about whether I hunt buffalo and say 'how' or ask me directions to the nearest casino, I am just so fucking sick and tired!"

"...Are you done, yet?"

Galegenoh gave Nashoba a scathing look and then glared at the nations.

"Just get in the damn car," he said. "And no more pictures or I swear I'll beat you with that camera."

"*H-Hai*, my sincerest apologies," Japan said, quickly stowing his camera in his suitcase.

The other nations got into Galegenoh's van with a considerable amount of trepidation, save for Russia, who was still out of it, and Romano, who actually got into a conversation with Galegenoh about things and people that pissed them off. As they drove away, Nashoba shook his head and turned to Oklahoma.

"Your father has such strange friends," he said.

"Yeah, but you know Dad," said Oklahoma. "He wants to be friends with everyone, so he ain't too particular."

"Something you've picked up on, Talako." He ruffled Oklahoma's hair affectionately before getting back into the driver's seat of the truck. "Well, let's get back. Best get our work out of the way if we want to make it to the party, ourselves."

"Right. Say, Uncle Choctaw, mind if I put some Carrie Underwood on the radio while we drive back?"

"You kids with your Carrie Underwood and your Toby Keith. Back in my day, we didn't have country music singers..."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Bet you guys didn't see that coming.

Yes. I've decided to include the Native Tribes as America and Canada's older brothers...
and sisters. I don't suppose that's going to cause any kind of trouble when the nations arrive for Thanksgiving.

The reason why I included the tribes was because they are legally recognized as independent entities within the United States, complete with their own governments, cultures, languages, and so on. They are not as powerful as they once were (weaker than countries but more powerful than micronations), but they have managed to remain alive and have even gotten stronger since more efforts have been made to preserve their cultural identities.

I did not know until after I chose the human name for Oklahoma that 'Allen' is the name typically given to 2P America. I actually named Oklahoma in honor of Allen Wright (a Choctaw Nation chief), the man who chose the name for Oklahoma.

My premise for this chapter is based on some articles I've read about assumptions foreigners make when they first come to the U.S. And the thing that shocked me most was how many people come to the U.S. and don't realize just how big it is. Many of them think they can travel by car from NYC to Orlando to Los Angeles within the space of a week (and still see everything!). We're the third largest country on Earth (not counting Antarctica), behind Russia in first place and Canada in second. And there's a lot more to the U.S. than what you see in movies.

From what I read, "Nashoba" is a Choctaw name which means "wolf" and "Talako" is a Choctaw name which means "eagle." "Galegenoh" is a Cherokee name which means "stag." Please correct me if these are wrong, my only resource is the internet, which isn't always reliable.

The Cherokee Nation participates in a number of film festivals, including Sundance in Park City, Utah.
A Girl Named "Tex"

Chapter Notes

With this post, I have officially caught up to where I have been on FanFiction. All further updates will be added here at the same time as on my FanFiction account (this chapter and all previous ones had already been written).

And now, the state many of you have been waiting for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"And, remember, she's not to be left alone near Mexico. It's difficult enough with them living next door to each other."

"Yes, Father," Delaware said in her normal, even tone. "I know. What 'bout the aunts and uncles?"

America gave a tired sigh.

"This is so much more complicated than I thought," he said. "And I wasn't very hopeful in the first place. Who knows what'll happen when they meet the nations? I think we should be prepared for knife fights, gun battles, possibly even some explosions. No, scratch that. Definitely be prepared for explosions."

"Va~ It's gonnuh be an all-out war," Rhode Island said, chuckling to himself. "This'll be fun."

"Benjamin Canonicus Jones, that's not the Thanksgiving spirit."

Rhode Island winced at the use of his middle name. The only reason he wasn't completely embarrassed by it was because of who it was he was named for. At least Connecticut's and Massachusetts's middle names were much worse.

"Hey, anyone seen Iowa?" said Ohio.

"She's talkin' with her friends on FaceTime," Utah said.

"Iowa actually has friends?" Illinois said with a look of amazement. "Who's thaht desperate?"

"Come on, Alphonse, be nice. Iowa has lots of friends."

"Unlike Illinois," Indiana muttered to herself.

"What did you just say?" Illinois said sharply.

"Everyone, chillax," said America. "Now isn't the time to get into a fight."

"Shit fuck," said a familiar grey extraterrestrial.

"No, Tony, I'm afraid it's not as simple as using a mind-altering laser beam. No matter how tempting the thought is."

"Hey, Dad," Idaho said, popping his head into the room. "Jus' had a call from the Deep South."
"Havin’ some trouble gettin’ in. ‘parently, the border patrol thinks ‘Bama’s an illegal immigrant."

"Wait, how’d the border patrol get them when they're in the country?"

"Dad, it's Texas," Nebraska said patiently. "She thinks anyone who isn't hers is an illegal immigrant or up to something. Remember that time Maine and Louisiana started talking in French in front of her and she had them arrested for using a 'made up language to plot a conspiracy'?

"How 'bout the time she tried to get me deported?" said New Mexico.

"Or when she, like, totally tried to sell me on the internet!" said California. "And for only, like, five bucks. I'm worth way more than that!"

"Fine, fine," America said. "I'll take care of this."

"What about your meeting, Dad?" said Indiana. "Those nation guys are probably turning up as we speak."

"Tex is at the conference center. I guess I'll have to ask her to greet them."

"Wow, Dad," said Ohio. "You must really hate the other nations."

"Texas isn't that ba-" He was cut off by a sea of identical, incredulous expressions. "I suppose I can send someone to make sure she doesn't do anything too traumatizing."

"Oh, leave it to me, Father," Connecticut said with a cold smile. "You just go on and help the others. I'll take care of everything."

America smiled and thanked his eldest son for being so thoughtful before heading out on his rescue mission. As soon as America was gone, Connecticut's smile became predatory and he steepled his fingers together.

"Excellent," he said quietly. "It's all falling into place." He turned to Vermont, who had been silently hovering nearby. "Ethan, tell Arkansas I have a little job for him."

Germany led the group of weary nations into the conference building. They had finally made it to Houston by train after that very irate Native American man had dropped them off at the train station. It did not strike Germany until now how odd it was that both that man, Galegenoh, and his brother the mechanic, Nashoba, had been able to understand them, as England was the only one in the group who spoke English. Unless the two men knew Nation-speak, it was strange that they had been able to understand all of the nations in the group…but that was surely impossible.

Still, he put it from his mind as they all approached the conference room. Many of the other nations had also arrived, some of them in similar states of exhaustion and stress.

The nations were just outside the room when the doors flew open as Arkansas was flung out of them. France nearly shrieked as he saw his little lookalike, but Arkansas was too distracted and angry to notice him. Arkansas stood up, brushed himself off, and then turned back towards the room.

"Oh, that's real classy," he shouted at someone in the room. "You really had me fooled. For a minute, there, I was thinkin' you was a lady!"

A gunshot was fired and Arkansas and the nations just managed to duck.

"Oh, so that's how it's gonna be, huh?" he said. "Morally-speaking, I would not ever hit a girl. But
seein' as you're more like some kind of laser-guided, napalm shark, I can make an exception."

He let forth a war-cry and charged back into the room. There was a series of punching sounds and he came flying right back out.

"Damn it!" he yelled. He stood back up again. "You won't stop me! An Arkansan never surrenders! And today is a good day to die!"

He gave another cry and charged in. There were even more furious fight sounds, including objects crashing and breaking, and Arkansas was thrown clear across the hallway to crash headfirst against a wall and slump to the ground unconscious.

The nations stared at him for a moment before nervously turning to look inside the room at what lurked within.

Sitting at the far end of the conference room with her feet propped up on the table, a large window behind her chair causing a lighting effect that partially concealed her in shadow, was a teenage girl. She had a tan complexion, long brown hair that was pulled back in a messy braid, and blue eyes that would have been prettier if they didn't have such a frightening glint in them. She was wearing black, Western style clothes and black cowboy boots. She also had on a black cowboy hat, which was decorated with designs of yellow roses on the upturned edges (a similar pattern was sewn into the black vest she was wearing). Around her neck, she wore a little pendant shaped like a star.

Seeing the nations, she gave a sharp grin.

"Well, **Buenos días**, cockbites."

America hurried into the conference building, checking his watch and silently groaning that he was running late. He honestly hated being late, which was why he often made it a point to show up early. However, it wasn't as though he could just leave his Deep South kids to deal with Texas's law enforcement on their own just to make it to a meeting. Especially when America found out that Alabama was in a pretty rough way, what with his seasonal Iron Bowl fever, and was clearly in so much discomfort from the internal rivalry that he wasn't certain he'd be able to make through Saturday.

Finally coming to a stop in front of the doors, America let out a sigh of relief that he'd made it. He was just about to go in when Russia, of all people, tried to make a mad dash out, only to be caught around the waist by a lasso and dragged back in, clawing frantically at the ground as he went.

"Uh-oh," was all America could say.

He winced as he pushed open the doors and stepped inside. His attention was immediately caught by the number of nations cowering around the room or tending to some rather nasty injuries. Above it all was the triumphant form of Texas, who had just finished hog-tying Russia.

"Tex, for goodness' sake, I wanted you to greet the nations, not maim them," he said.

"My way's better," Texas replied cheekily. "And this? Really, Daddy, this is just a bit of innocent rasslin'. Not my fault your friends are such pansy-asses. Besides, if they can't handle me at my worst, they don't deserve me at my best."

"I thought Connecticut said he was going to send someone over here to help you?"

"Yeah, Ark' showed up and started mouthin' off, but I showed him."
Damn it, Connecticut, America thought to himself. You sent Arkansas to calm Texas down? Why not just mix ammonia and bleach and tell people it's a safe, new cleaning product, while you're at it? At least Oklahoma hasn't arrived yet. That would've been ten times worse.

"Tex, you can't just go around picking fights with everyone you meet," America continued.

"Everythin' I did was non-lethal," Texas said, completely unrepentant.

A chorus of groans came from the nations around the room. Several of the male nations had icepacks pressed to their crotches where Texas had punched them.

"Texas," America said in a warning tone. "If you don't dial it back, I'm gonna have to suspend your Blue Bell ice cream privileges."

"You wouldn't dare," said Texas, narrowing her eyes.

"Are you prepared to take that chance?"

"I only just got Blue Bell back from the listeria outbreak! You can't take it away from me again!"

America just continued to look at her with a stony expression as he waited for her to make her choice. Finally, after a serious internal struggle and a battle of wills, Texas conceded by grumbling about her "Damn controlling, Yankee, Liberal father." She then reached into her cleavage and withdrew a tub of buttered pecan ice cream and a spoon; how she managed to conceal them in such a manner is, again, another of those little secrets known only to personifications.

As if to prove that Fate hated America, Mexico chose that moment to arrive. She took in the sight of all the injured nations and then turned her stern gaze on Texas.

"You do things like this just to anger me, don't you?" she said.

"No," Texas said, her smirk returning. "I do it because it's fun. And, yeah, because I know it pisses you off, Madre." There was a distinctly sarcastic quality to how she said that last word, as if it almost had no real meaning to her, and Mexico clearly noticed.

Mexico silently counted down from ten as she fought the urge to lose it. Her eldest child had always brought out the worst parts of her temper and seemed to take a kind of sadistic pleasure in doing so. Even when Texas had been a little girl and still under Mexico's care, she had been incredibly disobedient and had delighted in provoking people. Mexico then turned her glare on America.

"If I have said it once, I have said it a thousand times, America," she said. "If you had just let me raise Valentina, she wouldn't be such a troublemaker."

"Hey!" Texas shouted, her own temper flaring suddenly. "My name is not 'Valentina,' anymore. Goddamn it, I am Bonnie Jones and I am a goddamn Texan…and an American, but that's as such."

"I had you baptized as 'Valentina,' so that is your name."

"My real momma let me change it. She said my new name suited me better."

Mexico clenched her fists by her sides and gritted her teeth. Unnoticed by either Mexico or Texas, America was frantically waving his hands to try and indicate that they should stop before the argument devolved any further.

"I am your mother," Mexico said with a considerable amount of suppressed anger in her voice. "I
brought you into this world. Not that bruja."

Before Texas could launch into a furious tirade in defense of her stepmother, America managed to intervene by quickly steering Texas out of the room and quickly suggesting that she head back over to the ranch to make sure the others were setting things up right for the party. Already, America knew that the whole thing was a terrible idea and that someone may very well end up going home in pieces. America slammed the door shut as soon as Texas was outside and gave a very forced smile as he tried to act as though nothing was wrong.

"So, dudes, let's get this conference started," he said weakly.

Everyone just stared at him in disbelief.

Texas stormed through the front door once she was home. She was so angry that heatwaves were radiating from her head.

"Stupid Mexico," she muttered. "Who does she think she is? Always tryin' to tell me what to do. Even Daddy ain't that bossy. And she had the nerve to stand there and insult-"

"Salut, Bonnie," Louisiana said as she stepped into the hall to greet Texas. "Ça fait longtemps, dis done."

"Enough with the made-up language, Lou. How did your drive go?"

"C'était terrible! Your brutish police tried to arrest poor 'Bama. And him bein' sick as a dog, too."

"Roll Tide!" Alabama's voice called out from the next room. "No, wait. Wait, I say, War Eagle! No, wait! I don't, I say, I don't know!"

"Iron Bowl?" asked Texas.

"Iron Bowl," said Louisiana with a nod.

"Ugh, why can't he just make up his mind and pick a goddamn team, already?"

"What about you and your Cowboys and Texans?"

"Now, now, let's not go there, Lou. I'd hate to have to do somethin' we'd both regret."

Suddenly, there was a loud crash and a stream of swears.

"Sounds like Ohio and Michigan are at it, themselves," said Texas. "Can't even wait a few days, can they?"

Texas and Louisiana followed the sounds of profanity and insults about teams, cities, and universities to find Ohio and Michigan being physically restrained by North and South Dakota, respectively.

"North, have you got a firm grip on him, North?" South Dakota said worriedly as he struggled to hold Michigan. "Remember, we don't wanna hurt 'em, North, we just wanna keep 'em from fighting."

North Dakota just gave a noncommittal grunt in reply as he kept Ohio in a headlock.

"Let me go!" Ohio shouted. "I'm gonna rip his stupid face off and feed it to that pet rat of his."
"Mrs. Mittens is a wolverine," Michigan said, his tone frosty. "And yuh'd better pray I don' hide her in yur room, tonight. She's trained t'attack Fuckeyes."

"What are all ya'll idiots doin'?" said Texas.

North Dakota turned to look at her, his face not giving away even a hint of what he was thinking, and blinked twice.

"ND, speak clearly, you know I can't understand your weird accent," said Texas.

"Ohio and Michigan were fighting," South Dakota said in a fast-paced and concerned voice. "So I says to North, 'North,' I says, 'We can't let them go and fight,' and North agrees with me that the fighting was stupid, right, North? Anyway, Ohio and Michigan started throwing punches, so North and I get in there and we try to talk 'em down, but they won't listen to us. Isn't that right, North? They wouldn't back off, even after we said 'please' and everything, didn't they, North?"

North Dakota just looked at his twin blankly.

"North, I'm surprised at you! Using that kind of language. What kind of example does that set? So, anyway, North and I were trying to stop the problem before it got out of hand. Of course, North wanted to beat them over their heads with a baseball bat just to get 'em to stop, but I said to him, 'North,' I says, 'That's no way to deal with conflict. I know we did things differently, back in the day, but that's no reason to go beating our brothers over the head.' So North and I just tried to hold 'em off by getting a good grip on 'em so they can't hurt each other, because, like Daddy told us, 'Dudes,' he said, 'I don't want any more sports-related violence until after Thanksgiving.' So, I-"

"I get the picture," said Texas testily. "To be honest, I like ND's original idea of beatin' 'em over the head. Much less hassle."

"Fuck off, Tex," said Ohio. "And fuck off, SD. This is strictly between me and Bitch-igan."

"Not if you're both goin' to mess up my livin' room when we have guests comin' over. Speakin' of which, have any of the aunts, uncles, and cousins shown up, yet?"

"A couple," said Louisiana. "I believe dey said dey was goin' to have dere own meetin' at de conference center, seein' as we're all goin' to be right here."

"Wait, how many are comin' to the party this year?"

"Uh…all of dem."

Texas paused for a moment in thought as she made the mental calculations. Then, slowly, a mischievous grin spread over her face.

"This is goin' to be good," she said.

Suddenly, something bumped against her foot and Texas glanced down to see it was her pet armadillo, who had rolled over in his ball form to greet her. Texas chuckled to herself as she picked up her pet, turning away from her confused siblings.

"Come along, now, Clyde," she said quietly. "We've got some video cameras to set up."

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: Texas. How do I even begin to describe Texas? Basically, she's the badass lovechild of America and Mexico that they fought a furious custody battle over. Everyone hates her, but they'd die without her because she's so incredibly amazing. And I'm not just saying that because she threatened to rip out my skull and beat me to death with it if I didn't.

Blue Bell ice cream is kind of a state treasure of Texas. In 2015, however, the company had to do a massive product recall after an outbreak of listeriosis had contaminated the product. Dark days for ice cream lovers.

Also, why have I made almost all of America's daughters crazy? The boys are actually the calmest and most stable (well, mostly). And most of America's punishments for misbehavior involve food, for some reason.

After Texas was brought into the U.S., she changed her original name of "Valentina" to "Bluebonnet" (or "Bonnie," as she prefers to be called), after her state flower, in order to prove a point that she was no longer part of Mexico.

Texas refuses to acknowledge Mexico as her mother ever since the Texas Revolution (or, if she does, it's done in a sarcastic way).

Ça fait longtemps, dis donc – French, basically means "long time, no see."
C'était terrible – "It was terrible."

Also, if I have any Red vs Blues fans out there, I’m sure you caught my references.
I have been taking a course on the history of colonial America and there is something very important that I have learned. You cannot tell the story of the Americas without acknowledging the importance of the Native Americans. Had the Americas not had indigenous peoples, chances are that Europe would not have bothered to colonize in the "New World," as, at the time, they were more concerned with finding a route to the Indies.

This was very challenging to write, so I hope you all appreciate the effort that went into researching. Please remember that nothing in here is meant to offend and, if you see anything that is inaccurate or disrespectful, please let me know so I can correct it.

Warning: Things get a little dark, here. Mentions of historically-relevant violence and prejudice.

Texas smirked at the video monitors as she watched people filing into the building. Those poor nations had no idea that they were outnumbered about five-to-one. At least. Contact between the two groups attending meetings at the conference center was inevitable. And the results would assuredly be funny…well, funny to Texas, anyway.

The fact of the matter was, America and Canada were far from being each other's sole blood sibling. The two brothers were, as it happened, the youngest in a family of hundreds of nations. Granted, the tribes did not have quite the same level of "nationness" that the countries did, but they had survived for thousands of years and had unique cultures, languages, and governments that marked them out as distinct entities. Actually, America, himself, was technically the youngest of all his brothers and sisters…and none of them ever let him forget it, either.

The relationships between America and his siblings was complicated, to say the least. Of course, the relationships between the tribes and the states was even more complicated, and even slightly hostile in some cases.

One thing was certain, however. The states were not the only ones with long memories.

"I tell ya, Clyde," Texas said to the armadillo perched on her lap. "This is gonna be the best Thanksgivin' ever. Say, I know, that's what I'll give my thanks for, this year."

"Mind if I join ya, eh?" said a voice behind her.

"Bertie!" Texas exclaimed as she whipped around in her swivel-chair to see her cousin Alberta. "Howdy, cuz. Pull up a chair. I get the feelin' the show's gonna start soon."

Alberta grinned and pulled up the chair next to his favorite cousin.

"How're the moose-eaters doin'?" said Texas.
"Same old, same old, eh," said Alberta. "We all got in with Dad a little while ago. And when I heard about what was going on...well, how could I resist coming to join you, eh?"

"Fair enough. So, which one of our dear aunts and uncles do you think's gonna draw first blood?"

England was still nursing a few sore spots on his body from where that insane girl had punched him the day before. He had thought that the alcohol-fueled rampage of Pennsylvania had been bad, but now he was starting to think that the crazed part-Prussian state was an angel...if only because she was only unhinged part of the time. Honestly, how had America raised such a ruthless, vicious, and utterly remorseless child? Surely England's way of raising America hadn't left the lad so incapable of raising his own children to be normal, had it?

He sighed tiredly to himself as he turned down a nearby hallway. The nations were all currently off on a break and England needed to stretch his legs.

"Why did I come here?" he muttered to himself. "The last thing I want to do with my time is be surrounded by people who hate me and want to beat my head into the ground. Damn it, now I'm talking to myself."

As he continued to grumble under his breath, England stopped paying attention to where he was going.

"I mean, really, you'd think that a world superpower wouldn't let his children run around like a pack of wild animals."

"Caw!"

"What the bloody hell was that?!" England said, looking around at the sudden noise.

"Caw!"

He glanced up and there, perched on the lintel of a nearby door, was a large raven. Its beady eyes glinted in the light as it tilted its head. There was a faint, bluish glow around the creature that made England suspect it wasn't just an ordinary bird. For a moment, England was reminded of that dark poem one of America's people had written over a century ago...In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore...Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'

"Um...hello?" England said uncertainly.

'You can see me?' a deep, serious voice echoed in his head.

England looked around to see if there was anyone else nearby. No one was there, save for him and the raven.

"I'm assuming it was you who said that," England said to the bird.

'Hmm, this is unexpected,' the voice continued and the raven cocked its head, indicating that it was indeed the bird that was speaking. 'I did not believe foreigners capable of seeing we of the other realm.'

"Oh, are you a fae, then?"

'Foolish foreigner! I am an ancient force of creation, not some mere sprite! I guided First Nation across the great ice-bridge and have watched over her descendants for millennia!'
"First Nation?"

'She came from a land of ice and snow. Her people spread from west to east, north to south, building many other nations. The very land beneath your feet is in the care of a son of her lineage."

"You mean America?"

'That is the name you strangers gave him. When he was a boy, his mother named him 'Little Star,' as he was the youngest of all her children.'

"What do you mean 'all her children'? America is an only child."

'...You realize he has an older twin, do you not?'

"What? Oh, right! Columbia, wasn't it?"

'...Dotson' Sa needs to start paying me more to put up with this nonsense.' The raven shook its head in what could only be described as exasperation before fixing its gaze firmly on England once again. 'Perhaps it would be easier if I showed you.'

The raven flapped its wings and took off into the air, flying back up the hallway. England was confused, but decided to follow the bird. The raven's words were causing England's thoughts to race. He'd mentioned America's 'mother' and her 'children,' but England no idea what the raven had been talking about. After all, America had only appeared around the time that England and France had found him – well, all right, Sweden and Finland were the ones who found him first and America did look more like them than England or France – and that brother of America's, Canada (that was it), had appeared much later.

England continued to chase after the raven, who swooped in towards a pair of double-doors to a conference room. England expected the bird to stop, but something caused one of the doors to open just enough for the raven to fly straight through. England, not bothering to stop, ran right in after him, only to freeze in his tracks.

He briefly noticed where the raven had landed. He was currently resting on the top of the hand of a young woman seated in the large, auditorium-like room. On the desk in front of the woman was a name placard that read: Ahtna.

But England barely had time to register that as hundreds of pairs of eyes all turned to stare at him in surprise, before many of them slowly morphed into angry glares. Hundreds of men and women, all with varying shades of dusky skin, brown or black hair, and dark eyes, who seemed to have something about them that just made England know, without a shadow of doubt, that they were related to America despite the physical differences.

The gears began to turn in the former empire's head as he looked over the names of the people in the room. Specifically, on the side that seemed to be the angriest. Lenape, Muscogee, Seminole, Mohawk, Oneida, Pequot, Mohegan, Wampanoag... (two of them even had name placards with the word 'Powhatan' crossed out and 'Pamunkey' and 'Mattaponi' respectively written in its place). England also noticed the mechanic he and the others had encountered the other day seated behind a placard that read: Choctaw.

'All her children,' the raven's voice repeated in his head. Though England couldn't be sure if it was his own mind or if the bird had actually spoken to him again.

For a few more moments, England said nothing. Then, cautiously, he backed out of the room and slammed the door shut.
"Saghani Ggaay, you naughty bird," Ahtna said quietly to the raven sitting smugly on her hand.
"Now you've done it."

'Out of chaos will come order, my dear Ahtna,' the raven said to her.

"And I suppose young Texas did nothing to persuade you?"

The raven's little, black eyes shifted back and forth.

'I would never lie to you, Ahtna. So I will simply choose not to answer.'

England had pressed his back up against the double-doors, his arms spread wide as if he was expecting to have to hold back a mob of angry Native American tribes baying for his blood. Why, why, why had America never thought it necessary to inform him of something like this? England had always wondered about there possibly being a personification for 'Native America' before America was created, but he had not realized, in what he would admit might be a degree of colonial presumptuousness, that America's native peoples were so distinct as to merit personifications for every single tribe.

If England had thought America's states would be the worst of his problems, what with many of the Thirteen still hating his guts, he was sorely mistaken.

America and Canada had well over five-hundred recognized tribes. And every single one of those tribes had been wronged, one way or another, by the people who took their lands from them. England was the first to admit that he had committed grievous crimes against many of those people, things done in the arrogance, foolishness, and greed of a time when he was so intent on building an empire to rival France and Spain that he had stubbornly charged ahead and pursued only his own ends, no matter the cost.

Suddenly, a large number of things he remembered from centuries ago made far more sense to him. Events that he had regarded at the time with disdain or anger, but were now painfully tragic.

*America started talking in strange words he couldn't understand, so England yelled at him for not speaking a 'real' language...*

*America woke in the middle of the night, screaming about burning villages and people being slaughtered. England had assumed the boy was speaking of colonial villages being raided by natives...*

*A group of natives broke into the house England had built for America and tried to carry the boy off. England picked up a gun and fired...*

*England warned America not to go near the 'savages,' because they were uncivilized, had no respect for law and order, and consorted with the Devil...*

*A native woman stabbed England in the stomach, over and over, as he lay prone on the ground. She kept screaming about her mother and her little brothers being dead because of him...*

*England hired a group of Mohawk warriors during America's Revolution. Their leader looked at the bag of money with a measure of disgust, but accepted. Before he left, the leader, with an almost undetectable note of sadness in his voice, made England promise that the Mohawks' rights to their native land would be protected...*

"Oh, God, what have I done?" he said, feeling faintly sick. "I need to get out of here."
"Angleterre, there you are," came a familiar and most-unwelcome voice. France, closely followed by Spain, approached him. "Everyone is heading back for the meeting."

"We need to leave," England said, desperation slipping into his voice. "We need to leave right, bloody now."

"¿Qué?" said Spain. "What is wrong?"

"Just do what I say you damned fool!"

"Why are you standing in front of that door like that?" said France.

"You don't want to know. Believe me."

"Oh, England, I think your rotten food has finally caused your brain to stop working."

France chuckled, pulled England away from the door, and moved to go inside.

"No, don't go in!"

But France ignored him and Spain followed. The two flung the doors open.

The tribes had all moved down from their seats to stand just on the other side after hearing the ruckus the Europeans were causing. Just standing there, silent and stone-faced. Watching them.

The nations all looked up in surprise when a disheveled and breathless England, France, and Spain dashed into the conference room and slammed the door shut behind them before rushing to fetch whatever they could to form a barricade against it.

"What are you doing?" Germany said sternly.

"Saving our damn scalps, that's what," said England as he began dragging a heavy bookcase over and setting it in front of the door.

"Oui, we barely escaped," France added. "I do not think I shall ever feel safe again."

"Ve~ France, what is wrong?" said Italy. "Did someone hurt you and Spain and England?"

"Not exactly," Spain said, looking fearfully at the door. "We ran before they could get us."

"Who?" said Germany, looking irritated but also slightly concerned.

At that precise moment, America and Canada entered from a door on the other end of the conference room, accompanied by and sharing a laugh with a young girl, maybe ten years old. She had a swarthy complexion, a narrow face with an aquiline nose, long, dark brown hair with a braid down one side, and her eyes were a fiery shade that almost looked orange. She was wearing loose-fitting clothes in yellow and red, including a wrap around the top of her head made from strips of red and yellow cloth to which she had affixed two eagle feathers, and a pair of copper earrings in her ears.

"It's one of them," England said, diving for cover under a table, followed by France and Spain.

"Iggy, dude, what's your problem?" said America. "This is my daughter Arizona."

"Dinah Jones," the girl said with a friendly smile. She then took a little bottle labelled 'hot sauce' out of her pocket, opened it, and took a swig, much like how Canada would drink maple syrup.
"America," England said, poking his head out from under the desk. "We are in serious trouble. There is a mob of angry Indians out there waiting to murder us."

India looked up and furrowed his brow in confusion.

"I beg your pardon, but what did you say?" he said.

"No, not your people, India," England said. "I mean Red Indians."

"Excuse me?!" said America, who looked offended. "You can't call them that, anymore. You can call them 'First Nations' or 'Native Americans.'"

"Actually, most of 'em don't care if you call them 'Indians,'" Arizona added. "Tía Apache said it's because it means 'In dios' rather than 'Indios.'"

The other nations had turned to look at her in absolute incredulity.

"What?" said Arizona. She looked at America. "Papi, did I say something wrong?"

"I think everyone's a little shocked," said Germany. "Because it almost sounded as if you were saying that America's native people have a personification."

"Don't be ridiculous, Señor." Arizona gave a scoff. "The tribes don't have a personification. They have five-hundred and seventy-three. And that's not counting the ones who live with Tío Canada. They're Papi's big brothers and sisters!"

"The nerve of some people," Apache said as she and Lipan walked off to get some coffee. Technically speaking, they were both Apache tribes, but everyone found it less confusing to refer to Western Apache as simply "Apache," as the other tribes all had other designations. "Barging into an important meeting like they own the place."

"Wasn't that one guy the asshole who nearly killed me even though I allied with him?" said Lipan, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "You remember, the one that Hopi thought was her Pahana for a couple weeks until he burned down Awatovi?"

"Yup. I don't know why she never tried just stabbing him with a sharpened spoon or whatever the heck Puebloans use for weapons. Would've solved all her problems."

The two tribes got their coffees from the cafeteria and went to sit in the lounge to wait out the break. Lipan picked up a copy of Better Homes and Gardens Magazine and began to poke through it.

"Don't tell me you're going soft on me," Apache said when she saw what he was reading.

"I just need some ideas for when I remodel my kitchen," Lipan said calmly.

"Tch, kitchens. I remember when we all made due with open fires out under the open sky at night. What's next, are you and Mescalero going to start looking at fabric swatches together?"

"Leave me out of your arguments," Mescalero's voice rang out from across the room.

"Mind if I join you?" another voice said and the two looked up to see Oneida standing there.

"Actually, we do mind," said Apache crisply. "We only sit with other Southwesterns. Not people from the ice planet of Hoth."
"His name is New York and he's our nephew," Oneida said, rolling her eyes. "And it's not even as cold up there as it is at Canada's place." She took a seat, regardless of Apache's glare.

"I also don't want to sit near idiots who lose their baby brothers."

Lipan hid his face behind the magazine so that he wouldn't have to look at the angry stare-down his sisters were having.

"Oh, you did not just go there," Oneida said. "You know damn well that wasn't my fault."

"All I know is that if Mother had left America and Canada with me before she vanished, I wouldn't have let strangers run off with them."

"Hey, you can't go blaming Oneida for that," said Mohawk furiously as he passed by and overheard them. "It's not her fault we got raided."

"No, but, unlike you Iroquois, we Apaches don't run at the first sign of trouble."

"We don't believe in killing people in battle! It's dishonorable!"

"Right. So you flee like little girls the moment you realize you could get killed, yourselves. Just like a 'real' warrior."

"This coming from a glorified cow- and horse-thief."

"Enough, already," said Oneida, flicking a strand of her dark hair over her shoulder. "I just wanted to talk with you about something, Apache."

"Fine," said Apache. "But make it quick. I've got to give the next presentation and I just know that jackass Comanche is going to try and sabotage it."

"You could always ask Osage to kick his ass if he tries," Lipan suggested from behind his magazine.

"You mean Mr. I'm an oil baron now, I make a million dollars an hour in royalties, screw you guys?"

"Guys, seriously," said Oneida. "This is important." Her eyes narrowed. "The damn redcoat is here."

"Am I supposed to know what that means?" said Apache with a quirked brow.

"The guy who kidnapped America and Canada from us. The one who made them think we were their enemies. The guy Mohawk sold his soul to-"

"Hey, why are you picking on me, now?" Mohawk snapped. "I didn't sell my soul to the guy, I was just trying to keep America from getting hurt."

"By allying with the Brits over the colonists?"

"All right, so I made a bad judgement call on that. So did Cayuga, Seneca, and Onondoga. Besides, those Brits weren't all bad. They did get rid of that jerk Susquehannock."

"You shouldn't consider it a good thing that they killed our brother," said Lipan.

"Susquehannock stopped being our brother when he forced Lenape to become a tributary and nearly killed Cayuga and Seneca."
"Those damn Beaver Wars," Oneida muttered under her breath. The Beaver Wars were a dark time that spanned about a hundred years and saw many of the Northeastern tribes pitted against each other for control of lands with ample supplies of beavers, the pelts of which were highly profitable in trade with the Europeans. "But we've gotten off-track, again. I want to launch a revenge war against England."

"Sis, please," said Mohawk with a tired sigh. "We only fight in mourning wars or for self-defense."

"Didn't stop you from fighting for the redcoats, did it?"

"You're never gonna let that go, are you?"

"Well," said Apache thoughtfully. "I do enjoy a good fight."

"Did I mention Mexico will likely be there, too?" said Oneida.

Apache perked up, chucked her empty coffee cup into a nearby trashcan, and smiled almost hungrily.

"Ooh, I've been waiting so long for a rematch," she said. She slung an arm around Oneida's shoulders and the two walked off together.

"This is going to end badly," said Mohawk, shaking his head slightly. "I just know it."

"As long as I can have five solid minutes of quiet," said Lipan, "I don't care what they do." He turned another page in his magazine. "Hey, what do you think of this for a nice backsplash in a kitchen with beige wall paint?"

The time was the early 1600s...

Oneida nuzzled her nose against the chubby cheeks of the giggling, fair-haired infant. Little Star, as Mother had named him, was the last child she had brought into the world, right after Silent Warrior. Right before Mother vanished, she had left Little Star and Silent Warrior with Oneida and the other Haudenosaunee tribes (though they would soon be known by the foreign name of 'Iroquois'), though the boys continued to sneak out to see their siblings in the west.

A bald eagle sat perched in the beams of the wooden longhouse, watching Little Star with a protective gaze. Nearby, Silent Warrior slept cuddled up next to the polar bear cub which served as his own guardian animal.

Seneca stepped inside, brushing off snow from his winter clothing.

"What have you seen, brother?" said Oneida, noticing the worried look on his face.

"The strangers are drawing nearer to our villages," he said. "We may have to move further out if we want to avoid conflict."

"We cannot move in winter. It is too dangerous for our peoples. And Wyandot will never allow us to cross into his lands without a fight."

"And if the strangers find our little brothers, what then? The Powhatans have already sent word up this way that the strangers are building permanent villages. And I have met with some of Wampanoag's people who say that Patuxet has not been seen for some time."

"Do you think he is all right?"
"I don't know. Mohawk told me he had a dream about Patuxet and Mother. He said he saw Patuxet following Mother into a cloud of smoke, both vanishing as the wind blew it away."

"I don't like this. It reminds me too much of what we have heard of our family in the far south."

Oneida looked down at Little Star, who had finally tired himself out and drifted off to sleep.

"I'm afraid, Seneca," she said. "With Mother gone, Little Star and Silent Warrior have become the land in her stead. Susquehannock has already attempted to steal them away so he can control them. And they have been looking less and less like us as the days go by."

The twin boys had never fully resembled their older siblings, but, as time went on and the strangers from across the ocean had reappeared, they now looked nothing like their family, at all. Indeed, they would pass far more easily as children of the strangers.

"Mother tasked us with their protection," Seneca said solemnly. "And we will protect them. No matter what."

Oneida looked back at the sleeping forms of her baby brothers. They were so helpless and fragile and they depended on her and the others for everything. As she idly reached over to grab a clay jug, from which she took a swig – tasting the rich, syrupy liquid she had previously collected from the maple tree – before setting it back down, Oneida couldn't help but allow her thoughts to wander into the possibilities of what was to come. There were certainly great challenges on the horizon and she couldn't keep from worrying about those two, precious children.

Only time would tell if she would be strong enough to fulfil her promise to Mother.

Present Day...

The nations all continued to stare at Arizona after her little announcement.

None of them had ever considered the possibility that not only would America's states have personifications, his indigenous peoples would have them, too. After all, many nations simply assumed that America's native groups had been subsumed into the general population and that America, personally, had always represented all his people. Though, thinking about it now, it occurred to the other nations how ridiculous it was for a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white man to represent people who did not exactly share those physical traits.

"How the fuck are there so many of them?" Romano said, finally breaking the awkward silence.

"Well, they are all pretty distinct," said America. "What, did you think there would just be one, big 'Native America' to represent hundreds of groups of people who are each incredibly unique and who oftentimes don't even have similar languages?"

"To be fair, America," said Canada, "There was a Native North America, eh."

"Yeah, but Mom represented the land and the people. The tribes represent nations that are not strictly defined by land but have their own governments and stuff that are separate from ours." America looked intently at the other nations. "You mean to tell me you guys don't have people like that?"

Quite a few countries in Africa and South and Central America seemed to suddenly be very interested in looking at their shoes or whistling in a suspiciously casual manner while their former colonizers shook their heads.
There was one group of Europeans, though, who were incredibly interested in what America said. Norway gently touched the small charm bracelet he kept hidden within his sleeve as he shared a look with Sweden and Finland. They all knew they were sharing the same thought. Memories of Saami, the closest thing they had all ever had to a mother figure. Someone they had assumed had vanished as their respective governments became more restrictive and even hostile towards her and her people. In addition to them, Iceland was acting strangely furtive, as though trying not to draw attention to his obvious state of nervousness. There was a secret he had never told the other Nordics…

At that precise moment, Oneida and Apache chose to make their attack. They made for an interesting sight, dressed in their crisp business suits and wielding a chainsaw and a flamethrower, respectively.

"Payback time, bitches!" Apache yelled gleefully. "Mexico, you and I have an old score to settle!"

Mexico slapped a hand to her forehead and clenched her teeth. Apache and Comanche had once caused her enormous trouble. In fact, they were largely responsible for triggering the events that led to the war between Mexico and America. Well, the evil witch that America had married had been the one most responsible, as far as Mexico was concerned, but his siblings had done their fair share, too.

One thing was certain, though, and that was that nothing productive would be done at the meeting that day. As usual.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t remember if I mentioned it before, but, from what I can tell, Alberta is considered the Texas of Canada.

Raven ('Saghani Ggaay' to the Ahtna people) is featured in numerous Native American stories, usually as a trickster. He even features in the Athabaskan creation story, which contains a flood narrative wherein the creator, Dotson’ Sa (Great Raven), tells Raven to build a boat and gather two of every kind of animal.

Arizona's eye color is meant to be a reference to the state mineral, the fire agate. If you are curious as to why she has an eye color that no human could possess, kindly remember that this fic is set in an anime/manga, so unnatural eye colors are far from impossible for the characters (like, why does Prussia have red eyes and silver hair? And don't say it's because he's albino, because I don't think he actually is). Arizona's name "Dinah" is meant to be a reference to the Diné, which is the proper name for the Apache people.

The "Pahana" is the Lost White Brother who is destined to bring about the coming of the "Fifth World" in Hopi legend. He is a bit like Quetzalcoatl in Aztec mythos, a mysterious, light-skinned prophet destined to return. Similarly, the Hopi and other Puebloans have used the image of the feathered serpent in their art much like the Aztecs. The Hopi thought the Spanish leader might be the Pahana, until the Spanish destroyed the Hopi town Awatovi.

The Iroquois traditionally did not believe in killing people on the battlefield. The point of war, for them, was to take as many captives as possible in order to shore up the tribe's numbers (usually after the death of a tribe member). If someone was killed in battle, he was considered dishonored and it was believed his spirit would wander forever. That being said, during the American Revolution, all of the Iroquois tribes (save for Oneida
and Tuscarora) officially sided with the British.

Also, yes, the Native Americans invented maple syrup. Canada had to get his maple addiction from somewhere.

If you think all the Native American tribes were peaceful, harmless, earth-loving pacifists who always got along with each other and never did anything remotely violent and were completely helpless against White invaders, I'm sorry, but you are ignorant. The different Apache groups fought with each other, with the Navajo, with the Comanches, and, of course, everyone fought with the Puebloans (who were, generally, very peaceful people, especially the Hopi – though the Puebloans were the ones who launched a revolt against Spain and managed to kick his ass); the Apache and Comanche even had full-blown wars with Mexico. On the east coast, you had the Susquehannocks trying to conquer the other tribes and frequently getting into fights with the Iroquois and Algonquians. Humans are humans, conflict is in our nature, and no society is completely without violence. Just because the Native American tribes fought wars for more practical than ideological reasons (except in the case of revenge wars) does not mean that they were incapable of giving as good as they got.

The relationships between the tribes and the Europeans was immensely complex and the tribes were constantly shifting alliances and partnerships with the different European powers because – guess what? – many of the Europeans wanted their help, wanted to form partnerships with them, and wanted them to be involved in the making of the colonies, which actually left the Native Americans with considerably more influence than what your history book tells you. In fact, European colonists were actually leaving European settlements in order to join native tribes (and there are hundreds – if not thousands – of cases of this) and no amount of pleading, even from their own families, could bring them back. I have recently been reading this in an incredible book, "The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America," by James Axtell, which basically explains how the Native Americans won the culture war with the Europeans.
Old Acquaintances

Chapter Notes

So many OCs. So, so many OCs. At least that's the great thing about Hetalia. It doesn't matter how many additional characters you include, because it's already implied that a greater number of characters exist than officially appear.

Another doozy of a chapter to write. Sorry it took me a while.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Now, Apache, do you have something you'd like to say to Mexico?" America said.

"Bite me, bitch," said Apache. She was badly bruised, had a black eye, and her suit was ripped.

"Sis."

"I'm not apologizing, if that's what you want. Not to her or that Spaniard, over there." She gestured over to where Spain was having his wounds tended by Romano, who showed his concern for Spain's welfare by screaming at him about not doing something so stupid as to get into a fight with a crazy woman to try and protect Mexico as Mexico was perfectly capable of fighting her own battles without Spain's help. "And they can count themselves lucky that I'm not nearly as violent as Mescalero, Jicarilla, or Chiricahua."

"You came at me with a flamethrower," Mexico said, pressing a bandage with some ointment on it onto a burn on her arm.

"Oh, boohoo, poor Mexico got a few second-degree burns. You once killed me and took my fucking scalp. That was hell to regrow."

"You were stealing from my people. I was within my rights to kill you."

"Dudes, seriously, this isn't 1835," said America.

"You stay out of this, little brother," said Apache. "I've half a mind to kick your ass, too."

"Apache, just apologize for attacking Mexico."

"No! She's always thought she's better than us. Even before those Europeans showed up, she kept crossing into land that wasn't hers. And her sister, Aztec, wasn't any better, either."

"Dios mio," said Mexico. "Just let it go, already."

"I will not let it go until I prove, once and for all, that I am the better warrior."

"I hate to interrupt," said France, who looked like he really, really did hate getting involved, especially when the two furious women glared at him. "But I am becoming concerned about Angleterre. After that other young mademoiselle-"

"Oneida," Apache and America said.
"Oui, Oneida – after Oneida chased him out of here with that chainsaw…well, he hasn't come back, yet, and I am worried about what she might have done."

"Oneida's harmless," Apache said dismissively. "She probably just wants to chase him around for a little while and give him a good scare."

"Truly? That is all?"

"And once she captures him, she'll pull out a few of his fingernails and make him dance naked in front of everyone. I actually gotta hand it to those Iroquois on that; they may not be all that keen on killing in battle, but damn if they don't make up for it in other ways."

"What?!"

Many of the other nations, even those who did not particularly like England, looked very worried. Germany decided that it would be very bad for international relations if England ended up being tortured by an angry Native American tribe and so ordered that they all go out and find him before Oneida did.

"And so I said, 'Don't eat so many doughnuts, you'll make yourself sick,'" Odawa said to her sister Ojibwe as they stood side-by-side in the elevator. The two of them were the elder two of the Anishinaabe triplets, with their sister Potawatomi being the youngest. "And what does Wyandot do? He eats the whole friggin' box in one go."

"Uh-huh," Ojibwe replied as she stared at her phone.

"And guess who had to go out to the CVS to get him some Alka-Seltzer when he started complaining about a stomachache?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Me, that's who. Hey, Ojibwe, are you even listening to me?"

"No, actually. I'm looking at pictures of baby turtles on my phone. Look. Aren't they cute?" She held out her phone for Odawa to see.

"I will admit that they are adorable, as turtles usually are – but that's beside the point! Wyandot needs to learn some self-restraint. He can't be downing whole boxes of doughnuts and expecting me to go and buy him stomach meds afterwards. I have a budget to stick to! I can't be spending money on things not on the preapproved shopping list."

"You need to chill, Niimi."

"Don't tell me to 'chill.' I'm always perfectly calm and collected."

At that moment, the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. As the two ladies stepped out, they came face-to-face with an irritated Switzerland. They all froze and stared at each other for a moment. Switzerland actually turned pale as he took in the sight of Odawa, whose expression rapidly darkened as she recognized him.

"You!" Odawa screamed, pointing an accusing finger at Switzerland. "Oath-breaker!"

Somehow, Odawa managed to withdraw an axe from somewhere and charged at the Swiss, who, in his shock, had forgotten he had guns hidden on him; after all, fear and surprise can cause even
highly-disciplined soldiers to forget obvious things.

"Well, that's not something you see every day," said Ojibwe.

Suddenly, a familiar blonde man with enormous eyebrows ran past, pursued by a chainsaw-wielding Oneida.

"Neither is that."

Iceland needed to leave. He needed to leave, right now, before the other Nordics learned the secret he'd been harboring since around 1000 A.D.

It had started with the Nordics' father-figure, Scandia, the one who taught them the Viking way of life. He had decided to take Iceland on a sea voyage to "toughen him up," despite Norway's protests that Iceland was "too young." Their first journey had been with Erik Thorvaldsson (better known as "Erik the Red"), travelling across the freezing ocean to reach Greenland. The others found out about Greenland, eventually, when Norway and Denmark followed Iceland out there to find him, as Scandia had disappeared and left Iceland all alone in the new territory.

What none of them knew was that Scandia had taken him even further out to reach another land. **Vinland.** All because Scandia was chasing after a pretty woman who'd tried to stab him in the throat when they first met. She had obviously been a nation, as she could communicate with them, and had not taken kindly to the Norsemen taking her children's lands. Of course, one thing soon led to another between Scandia and the woman, and poor little Iceland was left to babysit his new sister Greenland as a result. Iceland tried not to think too much about how Greenland came to be or what Scandia and the woman did whenever they went off into the woods alone together.

However, Scandia eventually did something to get the woman furious with him and chase after him with a band of her equally angry children. Iceland still wasn't too sure, but he vaguely recalled words like "promise," "marry," and "responsibility" being screamed at Scandia. Iceland and Scandia holed up in their Greenland settlements for ages before Iceland, personally, decided to try and end the hostilities. He and his men slipped back over to the mainland and found the woman nursing a pair of newborn baby boys who looked too much like Scandia for it to be coincidence.

Negotiations ended up breaking down and Iceland had to flee back to Greenland. Once there, he found that Scandia was gone and he had to look after Greenland on his own for the next hundred or so years until, as previously mentioned, Norway and Denmark came to find him. None of them ever saw Scandia again.

"What're you gonna do, tough-guy?" Mr. Puffin, who was perched on his shoulder, asked Iceland upon noticing his worried expression.

"I'm going to get out of here, fast as I can," said Iceland quietly.

"They're gonna find out."

"No one's finding out anything."

"Iceland, where are you going?" said Finland. "We are supposed to help find Mr. England."

"Uh…um…snack break?"

"Oh, okay. Don't take too long, though. This is very exciting. I can't believe none of us ever knew that America's native tribes have personifications."
Texas and Alberta were rolling around on the floor laughing as they watched the interactions between their extended family members and the nations. Aunt Oneida had lost England, but had recruited some of the other tribes with an axe to grind against England to help her. Of course, Texas and Alberta knew that England had managed to get into the air vents, where he was currently crawling in a desperate bid for escape, as Texas had special heat-seeking monitors installed in them for just such an eventuality.

Because of course she did.

"Where's he headed now, eh?" said Alberta.

"Looks like the…oh, perfect, he's headed for one of the trapdoors," said Texas with a devious smirk. Sometimes, Texas really loved being Texas. *Hal! Sometimes?* Texas thought to herself. *That's a good one. As if I'd only love being me 'sometimes'?* "Mr. Williams, prepare to pull the lever," she continued.

Alberta reached for the lever on the control panel.

"And, three…two…one…Now!"

England was breathless as he made his way through the ventilation system. He'd barely escaped the chainsaw-wielding woman. Considering he recognized her from America's Revolution days as the leader of a raiding party that had attacked one of his camps, England was fairly certain that a simple apology for years of enmity would not exactly work to solve the situation. England also held little hope that any of the tribes he had once allied with against America, both in the Revolution and the War of 1812, would be keen to help him as he'd kind of, sort of, maybe left them to die when he withdrew his forces and stopped selling them weapons – which had been the only things hindering America's claim to the west.

Just as England was beginning to ponder how best to maybe make peace, the ground suddenly opened up underneath him and he toppled out of the vent into a room below him.

"Ugh, for the love of the queen, what just happened?" England said, rubbing the sore spot where he'd bumped his head.

He didn't have time to think much about it as his instincts, honed from years of war, compelled him to flatten himself against the floor as a hailstorm of bullets flew overhead. For a moment, England recalled times during the First and Second World Wars when he'd had to do something similar while under heavy fire on the battlefield.

Unlike in war, however, a red warning light came on and a voice on a loudspeaker said, "Emergency. Live presence on range. Cease fire, immediately."

A bell rang and England heard a door click open.

"What the fuck do you think you were doing, huh?" an angry male voice said as a figure stormed over to England. "Were you trying to get killed?"
England opened his eyes and saw that angry micronation of America's, Molossia, glaring down at him. Obviously, Sealand's little group had decided to have one of their micronation meetings there, too.

"What do you mean by dropping into a live firing range?" he demanded.

"It's not like I bloody chose to," England snapped back. "And, what the hell is a firing range doing in a conference center?"

"It's Texas's place. Of course there's a firing range. How else do you expect to blow off some fucking steam after a meeting?"

"Hey, Jerk-England!" Sealand called into the room. "Molossia was teaching us how to shoot. I'm a natural!"

"You were teaching children how to shoot?!" England shouted at Molossia.

"Relax," a new and unfamiliar voice interjected. "They were using rubber bullets. I wouldn't let children use real ammo until they've had more practice."

England looked at the newcomer. He was a tall, muscular, dark-skinned teenager, with black eyes and short, curly, black hair. He had the beginnings of a moustache growing in above his upper lip. His features were sharp and he had a wide, bright smile that reminded England somewhat of America.

"And, who are you?" said England.

"Black Seminole," the young man said, shaking England's hand vigorously, though England hadn't offered it.

"…What?"

"He's kind of a micronation like us," Sealand said cheerily.

"Yeah," Black Seminole said. "You see, my Mom, the Seminole tribe, her folks kind of, well, mingled a lot with freed or runaway slaves."

"And that merited a personification?"

"Considering my people aren't officially recognized as Seminoles and we have our own culture and communities distinct from my Mom's? Yeah, seems legit. Anyway, what were you doing walking into a live range?"

"I didn't walk in here! I was dropped from the air vent."

Black Seminole glanced up to see the opened trapdoor.

"Huh, would you look at that," he said thoughtfully. "Why were you in the vents, then?"

"I was escaping one of, well, I suppose she's one of your aunts."

"Need to be more specific, there."

"How on earth do you expect me to know which one she was?"

"Did she have any special tokens or something on her?"
"Oh, yes, I think she was wearing a maple leaf pendant."

"That'd be Aunt Oneida, then. Whoa, you must've done something bad to get her angry at you. She's normally pretty calm."

"Jerk-England has that effect on people," said Sealand.

A group of nations had reconnoitered in the cafeteria, where a number of the tribes had also chosen to go when they realized some of their own number were missing. Many of the tribes looked on at the nations warily, though the U.N. was off-put by the fact that they were radically outnumbered, even if the individual tribes did not have the same kind of power that independent countries did (quality may be better than quantity, but quantity has a quality all its own).

A couple of the Alaskan tribes were glaring at Russia, who just smiled and waved at them. Japan tried to hide his unease as he saw one of the Alaskan tribes, Unangax (better known as "Aleut"), was the same woman who had laughed at him as she was carted off back when Japan invaded the Aleutian Islands; that same woman now smirked at him and, upon being introduced to him by America, actually told him how much her dear niece Alaska was looking forward to seeing him again.

"Hey," Mi'kmaq tribe said as he noticed Iceland, who was doing his best to stay out of sight. "I know that kid! He's the son of the guy that ran out on Mother!"

Iceland slapped a hand to his face and blushed in embarrassment as everyone turned to look at him. He couldn't even bear to look at the other Nordics in that moment.

"Icey, what's he talking about?" said Denmark.

"Yes, little brother, what is he talking about?" Norway added, more firmly.

Before Iceland could even begin to think of a reply, Switzerland burst into the room, knocked over a table, ducked behind it, and was finally able to pull out a gun. A screaming Odawa charged in after him, axe hoisted high and teeth bared.

"You made a fucking promise!" she yelled at him. "I agreed not to let my men kill you and all you had to do was marry me!"

"Oral contracts are not legally binding," Switzerland shouted back. "I made that promise under duress."

"What on earth is going on?" Germany demanded. "Switzerland, who is this woman and what is she talking about?"

"Back in the early 1700s," Switzerland explained, not taking his eyes off the furious woman who was still brandishing her axe. "England hired me to do a bit of mercenary work for him to keep France away from America. Next thing I know, a local chief starts a rebellion and I'm getting dragged out of the fort by a raiding party."

"And then I foolishly decide to show you mercy," Odawa said with an angry, teary-eyed huff. "I told my men they couldn't kill a guy as pretty as you and generously offer you a chance to live by marrying me."

"I only agreed because the alternative was being tortured to death. And I never signed anything, so I'm not bound by an agreement."
"My axe says different."

"Well, my gun says, 'no border crossing, stay out.'"

"Ah-ha!" a voice crowed from outside. "Found you!"

The sound of a chainsaw whirring was again heard and England charged into the room, pursued by Oneida and those siblings who had agreed to join her war party. Canada just sighed and shook his head at the sight, wondering what on earth was up with his family and chainsaws, before silently making his way out of the room.

While the room erupted into chaos, with the lines being drawn in the sand and nations and tribes choosing which sides they stood on, Texas and Alberta continued to laugh as they watched it all unfold.

"Well, Clyde," Texas said to her armadillo. "What should we do next?"

Clyde the armadillo rolled off of Texas's lap and bounced onto the control panel. Toddling across it, he came to a large yellow button which he pushed with his stubby forelegs. There was a 'beep' and, then, the sound of a fiddle playing "Turkey in the Straw" erupted from every loudspeaker in the building.

"Lookit their faces," Texas chortled as she watched the reactions of the adults on the monitor. "They don't even know what to do now."

"I say, Tex," said Alberta. "You sure know how to live, eh. Dad would never let me get away with things like this."

"For a good reason, Bertie," said a calm, soft voice behind them. "How aboot you both step away from the control panel and video monitors, eh?"

"Well, shit," said Texas.

The distraction of the music only lasted so long. Soon enough, everyone was back to fighting. Some of the people present didn't even have any reason to be angry with the people they were antagonizing, they merely wanted a chance to fight. Of course, it all came to a head when one person had enough.

"EVERYONE, SHUT UP!"

Everyone turned and saw one of the tribes standing at the head of the room next to a very weary-looking America. The tribe, in question, was Wampanoag. He'd been through enough of this nonsense. He'd had to live through centuries of Native-European hostility, had watched his little brother Patuxet die the same day that Squanto succumbed to illness, had his people decimated by war and disease, had his very culture stripped from him at times, and had nearly followed his mother and many of his siblings into whatever shadowy world where dead personifications go.

To sum it all up, he was sick and tired of pointless fighting over past wrongs, prejudices, mistakes, and misunderstandings.

As Mother had always warned him: *People are idiots, my son. And do not think non-humans are exempt.*
"Thank you," he said sternly to his family and the nations. "I think it's time we all put the past in the past." Several people made noises of protest, but he held up a hand and silenced them. "We are supposed to be more mature than this. Many of us have done things to harm each other, things which we can never fully forgive, but allowing it to progress this far is too much."

"But, Wampanoag," Oneida said. She then turned a fierce glare on England. "This man kidnapped our baby brothers."

"I did no such thing," England retorted sharply. "I found America wandering alone in a field. And… that other one…what's his name?"

"Canada!" every tribe in the room shouted, joined in by a handful of nations who actually remembered Canada. Canada, himself, who was just entering the room, dragging Texas and Alberta with him, jumped at having his name called out by so many people.

"Right. And Canada I took from France."

"A likely story," Oneida said, clearly not believing him. "And I suppose that raid on our tribe was an 'accident,' was it?"

"Uh, Oneida," said Mohawk. "You do remember that was Susquehannock that led that raid, right?"

"He had to get his weapons from somewhere. The point is, that raid caused us to lose America and Canada. Next thing I know, America's in the clutches of caterpillar-brows, over here."

Unnoticed by everyone else, Finland leaned over and whispered to Sweden: "Sve, wasn't 'Susquehannock' the name of that tribe we did trade with?"

"Hmm," Sweden responded affirmatively. He remembered the group of natives. Finland had once tried to talk to their leader about the Christian faith and had gotten a round of derisive laughter in response.

"I didn't know America had any family," England said. "If I had-"

"What, you'd hand your shiny new colony over to us 'savages'? Don't you dare expect me to believe you would have given him back to us! He was too valuable an asset for you. And all you cared about was how much money he could make you. That's why you tried to break him with your cruel punishments and your taxes."

"Sis," America said. "England wasn't all that bad."

"How can you say that?" She now looked tearfully at America. "After everything he put you through."

"Oneida, it's been almost three hundred years. England and I have worked out our issues…" He threw a glance at his scowling former guardian. "For the most part. And we're like bros, again. What's so wrong with that?"

Oneida finally broke down and flung herself against America, absolutely sobbing.

"H-he took you away!" she cried. "He sh-shot at us when we tried t-to bring you h-home where you belonged. And-and…you loved him more than us!"

"Oneida, that's not true. I love everyone in my family."
"And, Oneida, remember what Mother always told us," said Wampanoag.

"You aren't learning much if your mouth is moving?" said Oneida.

"No."

"Never test the depth of water with both feet?"

"No. I'm talking about what she always said about the land. The land does not belong to us; we belong to it."

"Way to be cliché, Wampanoag," one of their brothers called out.

"Shut up," Wampanoag said to him calmly before turning back to Oneida. "We're all guilty of one evil or another. Can you honestly say you have no innocent blood on your hands? That you never inflicted harm on someone for your own gain or due to a misunderstanding?"

"I…no, I can't," Oneida said sadly. She once again thought back to those damn Beaver Wars. She'd killed her sister Erie for supporting Wyandot and Susquehannock. Permanently killed her by burning her villages and scattering her people until Erie wasn't strong enough to survive a fatal wound from a hatchet. The other members of the Iroquois Confederacy had helped to do it, breaking their own rules of bloodless warfare, but it was Oneida, herself, who dealt the killing blow.

"Then I suggest you stop trying to force America to choose between his blood family and his adoptive family."

Oneida suddenly broke down and started sobbing against America – who was now bright red in embarrassment – again. She hugged him so tightly that, to anyone but America, it would have been painful.

"I-I'm so s-sorry, Little Star," she said. "I didn't m-mean to hurt you like that."

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to, sis," said America.

Oneida cringed internally at the thought of having to apologize to England for anything, but she didn't let it show.

"I'm…s-sorry for attacking you, Mr. England," she said, forcing herself to sound remorseful.

"I suppose it was understandable," England said with a tired sigh. "And I have had worse from my brothers and sister."

"Too right ya have, Artie!" Ireland called out.

"Piss off, Erin!"

"Uh, excuse me," Odawa spoke up, her tone tinged with irritation. "Aren't we forgetting the most important problem, here? You know, the fact that this man," She gestured at Switzerland with her axe, "is in breach of a promise of marriage."

"Wait, that's the woman you were forced to marry, Switzerland?" England said to Switzerland.

"It was a non-binding agreement made under duress!" Switzerland repeated.

And then the room erupted into arguments once again. Wampanoag and America both shared a look, silently asking each other why they even bothered. Canada approached them, dragging Alberta and
Texas behind him. The state and the province both looked sheepishly at their respective fathers and uncles.

"Um, I can explain?" said Texas.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Up next will be the Thanksgiving party (I apologize that this is all coming out after Thanksgiving has already passed, but it's been a busy time for me).

1835 – Sonora put an official bounty on Apache Indians. 100 pesos for the scalp of a male Apache age 14 or older. Chihuahua followed soon after and added an extra offer of 50 pesos for the capture of adult female Apaches and 25 pesos for the capture of children under 14. This invited hundreds of bounty hunters from across Mexico and the U.S.; some bounty hunters were even from other tribes.

While Iroquois warfare tended to be rather bloodless (at least before Europeans arrived), captives brought back to the tribe were often subjected to torture and humiliation before the tribe members decided whether to kill them or induct them into the tribe. And if you were adopted by the tribe, you had better put in a good effort to learn their culture and not try to escape or they would kill you in a particularly unpleasant way.

The Susquehannock were allied with the Swedes and Finns of New Sweden and purchased weapons from them. The Susquehannock also vehemently resisted Christian mission attempts to convert them.

Ojibwe, Odawa (or "Ottawa"), and Potawatomi being triplets is a reference to the Council of Three Fires where the three tribes formed their Anishinaabe alliance. The Ojibwe are the "keepers of the faith," the Potawatomi are the "keepers of the fire," and the Odawa are the "keepers of trade." Turtles are important in Anishinaabe cosmology, as it was believed the world (or, at least, North America) rested on the back of a giant turtle.

The Icelandic Vikings were the first Europeans to set foot in North America, first in Greenland and then in the Vinland colony. Greenland is America and Canada's big sister. This is why America and Canada look like the Nordics; also, when Sweden and Finland found baby America, it sort of reaffirmed a familial connection in whatever weird way genetics work for nations and they became kind of secondary parents as the first European nations to find him (hence, why Delaware considers Sweden and Finland, her original founders, to be her grandparents rather than uncles the way the other states do with the other nations, as she addressed Sweden as "Farfar," "grandfather," when they met back in Chapter 4).

The Black Seminole are a subset of the Seminole tribe. Descendants of blacks and Seminoles, they are technically recognized as a separate part of the Seminole tribe (so I figured they would have their own personification as the son of Seminole, herself). The Seminoles were unusual compared to their neighboring tribes as they often helped and protected runaway slaves. The Seminole were also unique in that they treated their own slaves more like feudal dependents than chattel and the blacks living with the Seminoles formed their own communities within the tribe. And, yes, Native Americans participated
in slavery, it wasn't just whites who did it, and there have been numerous cases of mixed-race descendants of black slaves suing for recognition as members of particular tribes. Black Seminoles are also associated with the Gullah culture.

The British frequently hired Swiss mercenaries, particularly in dealing with problems in their American colonies. During an Indian raid on Fort Sandusky in Ohio back during Pontiac's Rebellion, a Swiss commander was taken prisoner but was spared from execution when a native woman of the Odawa claimed him as her new husband. The Swiss man lived with the tribe for a few weeks before seizing his chance and escaping, followed all the way back by his very angry wife. There is an excellent portrayal of this by Cadaska on Deviantart, entitled "APH Swiss in America," from which I learned about this event (Cadaska has done a lot of really cool and really funny work, please check out their page if you get the chance).
Chapter Notes

And now, the Thanksgiving party. Please note, there will be slightly heavy themes in this. After all, it is about Thanksgiving (why can't I avoid historical angst?).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I honestly don't see how what me and Bertie did was so wrong," Texas said as she dropped another turkey into the fry vat.

"Tex, darlin'," Tennessee said with a sympathetic smile. "I love ya, but you really weren't doin' much to help. Daddy wanted everyone to be introduced in a more congenial settin'. Preferably one with enough booze that they'd forget whatever it was they hated about each other."

"My way's still better. It's just like rippin' off a Band-Aid. Quick and incredibly painful."

Tennessee just smiled again and shook her head fondly. Texas had never been the most diplomatic of women. It was why her bad relationship with Mexico had erupted into a fury of gunfire and painful words that could never be taken back. But Texas generally meant well…usually. The fact was, she often didn't realize how her behavior came across to others and didn't take into account that not everyone was as physically and emotionally resilient as she was when she decided to get people involved in her more hare-brained schemes.

America and Tennessee were probably the only ones who realized it.

"So, Uncle Mattie caught you two?" Tennessee continued after a moment as she worked on the cornbread stuffing. "Bet that wasn't too pleasant."

"Yeah. Crazy Canadian. There's somethin' not right about folks what live so far north. The Dakotas, Maine, Washington, and Minnesota are weird enough, but the Canadians are a whole different kettle of fish."

"Don't have to tell me twice. There's a reason why I don't go past the Mason-Dixon Line, if I can help it. You get into those colder climes…I swear, it does somethin' to a body."

The two girls shivered for a moment, as if a strange chill passed over them, before going back to their work on the dinner.

"At least Bertie's close to bein' normal," said Texas. "Not completely normal, mind, but close enough."

"Oh, Tex, could you be a dear and check the cranberry sauce?"

Tex quickly tossed another turkey into the fryer and moved over to where an enormous vat of cranberries was stewing.

"Looks fine," she said. "Consistency's still a li'l too thin."

"Oh, add in a bit of the brown sugar. Gives it more texture and a richer taste."

Burying the Hatchet
"Hmm. You sure this'll be enough?"

"If not, Massachusetts said he'd have a truckload more cranberries brought in. Yankee though he is, he's pretty dang efficient."

"Speakin' of damn Yankees, how're Del, Penn, and Ham doin' on those pies?"

"For the last time, Tex, Del ain't a real Yankee. And I'll check."

Tennessee, not ceasing in her persistent mixing of the stuffing, peeked out of the nearby kitchen window to look out into the yard where Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire were in a ruthless, cutthroat battle to see who could make the most pies for the dinner, operating out of special kitchen tents they had arranged for the occasion. They were only allowed to do the pumpkin, apple, and berry pies, as the Southerns maintained an official authorization for responsibility for the pecan pies (after all, as everyone knows, only Southerners can make pecan pie correctly). Minnesota also had her own kitchen tent where she was allowed to work on her Bundt cakes in peace – and pity the poor fool who bothered her while she was in her 'zone.' Oklahoma and Arkansas were also having a pitched battle concerning whose red velvet cake was better, and the two boys currently looked as though they'd had a brutal knife fight from all the red smears on their clothes, skin, and hair.

"Everyone knows mine's better," Arkansas snapped. He stubbornly crossed his arms over the front of his apron – which had the words 'Save a horse, ride a cowboy' printed on it. "You wouldn't know real cookin' if it bit you on the backside!"

"Noah's actin' like his usual self," Tennessee said to Texas. "Any second, now, I expect Jessie will come along and slap him upside the head for wastin' time."

"What is up with them, anyway?" said Texas. "I've never known their people to be particularly hostile towards each other. But, I don't know…"

"Hey, you dang idgit," South Carolina said angrily, giving Arkansas a sharp slap to the head. "Quit your gabbin' and get back to work!"

"I make a point not to argue with ladies," Arkansas retorted. "But, seein' as you ain't no lady, South Carolina, I feel no guilt in sayin', 'Mind your own dang business, you palmetto priss!"

"Backwoods hick!"

"Beetle-browed elitist!"

"Toothless banjo-player!"

"Black Sheep of the South!"

"Stop fightin'!" Kentucky pleaded, stepping in-between his older sister and younger brother. "Stop fightin'! Can't you see you're tearin' this family apart?!"

The two shoved Kentucky out of the way and resumed bickering fiercely. Indeed, it looked as though pistols would soon be drawn.

"Should we stop them, do ya think?" said Tennessee.

"Nah, just let 'em wear themselves out," said Texas. "If it lasts through the end of the party, they'll do the ol' pistols at dawn, come mornin'. Nothin' like an honor duel to start off Black Friday, don't you think?"
The nations were, understandably, incredibly wary as they made their way to Texas's address. After the unfortunate events of the last couple days, everyone was decidedly on-edge about attending a gathering of this kind. There were a few exceptions, obviously.

The nations who'd never had a reason to harm or fight with America, his states, or his native peoples were perfectly secure in the knowledge that they weren't on any revenge lists. Australia, especially, was quite keen on making a good impression with America's many, attractive older sisters. Former American territories, too, knew that they were protected from potential danger as they had their old ties to the states. It wasn't just the Philippines and Liberia who maintained a familial bond with the Americans; Palau, Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia all had a deep fondness for them, too.

The nations all pulled up in front of the large ranch house. Of course, 'large' is a fairly relative term. 'Large' in Texas has a completely different meaning than elsewhere in the world, or even elsewhere in the United States. Let it simply be put, then, that Texas's house and property were substantially greater in size than what many of the other nations were accustomed to.

The surrounding field had been arranged as a kind of fairgrounds, complete with tents where food was distributed or activities and games were set up for the entertainment of the guests. After all, with hundreds of attendees, it wasn't as though America's family could have a small, private gathering. The nations began to cautiously move about the festivity, mindful of what could happen if they ran into someone with an old grudge. However, their fears seemed to be largely groundless, as the copious amounts of food (and no small amount of alcohol for the adults) caused most of those present to relax and not inflict severe physical or psychological injuries to each other.

A few of the Europeans ended up getting shuffled over by the push of the crowds to a spot where people were throwing axes at tree stumps in a contest to see who could get their axe closest to the center.

"Oh, Sve," Finland said to Sweden. "Why don't you have a go? You are the best axe-thrower of all of us."

"Hej," Denmark protested. "What about me?"

"What about you?" said Norway dryly. His eyes, however, drifted over to where Iceland was standing. His little brother had been keeping his distance from the rest of the Nordics ever since that shocking announcement one of the tribes had made. Iceland said he would talk about it when they got home and Norway was going to hold him to that promise.

Sweden, Denmark (who couldn't back down now that his axe-throwing skills were being questioned), and a couple other interested Europeans stepped forward to join the contest and were met by a teenage boy with a clipboard. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and pale, with a stern, round face. His silky, dark brown hair was pulled back into a low, short ponytail, though one strand of hair remained stubbornly loose. His eyes were a dark grey, but held a slightly silver glint to them, like Colorado's or Alabama's eyes. He was wearing a red flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, dark trousers, and brown waterproof shoes (more commonly known as "duck shoes").

The boy said nothing but tapped at his clipboard with his pen. When no one moved or said anything, the boy furrowed his brows into a deeper frown and impatiently pointed at one of the nations with the pen. The nations all shared looks and shrugged, though more than a few gave the boy rather nervous looks.

Suddenly, they heard light-hearted laughter and the familiar form of Massachusetts appeared.
"Don't worry about Maine," Massachusetts said, slinging an arm around the other boy's shoulders. "My little brothah just needs you to give yah names."

Considering how much taller Maine was to Massachusetts, it was a wonder that the older state got away with calling Maine 'little' in any sense. Although physically younger, Maine was a towering and intimidating presence who looked like he was contemplating what ways in which to kill everyone around him and where to dispose of the bodies.

"He's been real excited about hosting this contest," Massachusetts continued. "Isn't that right, Maurice?" he added with a smile at his stone-faced brother.

"Feh," was all the response which Maine gave.

"Pahdon him. Maine's always been more the 'strong, silent' type."

As he went about signing each nation up, handing them a set of axes, and directing them to a section, Maine never said a word. It was incredibly unnerving, though Massachusetts clearly didn't notice the tension as he assisted his brother.

Suddenly, the air was pierced by the sound of someone screaming in profane French. Two other teenage boys were arguing furiously in one of axe-throwing lines, one of them pointing at an axe lodged near the center of the stump. The calmer of the two was of an average height and build, with black hair that had a loose, wispy curl, and blue-green eyes. The second was taller and leaner, with silky, dark blonde hair that was slightly untidy at the top, and violet eyes that were only visible because he had tilted his dark sunglasses down.

Their aunts and uncles in the neighboring lines just ignored them, too used to the arguments those particular boys always had to get involved.

"I wonder which states those are," Denmark thought aloud.

Unfortunately, the two boys heard him and whirled around to glare at him.

"We are not American states!" the louder of the two boys screamed. He then said a few more not very nice things in French.

The black-haired boy just sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"René, while it is annoying, you don't need to overreact, eh," he said.

"Va te faire enculer, Ontario," the other boy said spitefully. "I am not American. I am not even Canadian like you and the rest of the peasants I call my siblings. I am Québec. And, one day soon, everyone will fucking have to acknowledge my independence!"

While Quebec gave a lengthy tirade, generously peppered with French expletives, about why he deserved to be recognized as his own nation and Maine continued to terrify the nations with his ominous presence, America was going over his speech. Every year, he stood up and said a few words to his family. In the more recent years, his speeches had gone down much better than they had only a few decades ago.

It had taken a long time to resolve the conflicts he'd had with his siblings. While America, himself, represented the whole of the nation, including all the different groups of people, he still had to take orders from his government. And, in addition to that, America would admit that, in the past, he'd allowed himself to be blind to the crimes committed in his name and had been fooled by people he'd
trusted to act in his best interests.

And, in one particular case, fooled by a woman who had swayed him with pretty words and promises while sowing strife in his family.

At the end of the day, though, the bonds of family, love, and forgiveness always won out. Granted, the only way he'd been able to convince some of his siblings from the west (particularly Lakota) of his sincerity was to participate in a traditional sun dance back in 1980, but, as he idly brushed the fading scars on his chest, he had done so proudly and considered the fact that it meant his siblings would actually look at him with an emotion other than betrayal to be worth whatever pain he'd gone through to get to that point.

"Get back here, young lady!"

America looked up and saw Mattaponi and Pamunkey chasing after Maryland. He snickered to himself as he remembered that his sisters still hadn't given up on trying to convince his daughter to wear her hair in a braid, despite how short it was, as they considered it inappropriate for an unmarried girl to go around with short hair. His siblings were all very particular about hair and some of them still argued about it.

"Hey, you all right?"

America glanced to his right and saw Wampanoag watching him with a note of concern in his eyes. Of all his siblings, Wampanoag was perhaps the most understanding and forgiving. That was certainly very significant, as he was the one who shared the so-called "First Thanksgiving" with the Pilgrims. America, himself, hadn't even been there, as he and Canada had been living with the Iroquois at the time, but he'd felt the arrival of the colonists each time they landed. They'd been strangers, outsiders, not his people, not like the people of his siblings and his mother. America wasn't entirely certain when that changed.

When the colonists became his.

They hadn't been his, at first. And, while America was in his care, England persistently referred to the colonists as his people and subjects, despite the fact that they lived in America's lands and a vast majority of them weren't even English. Maybe they became America's when they chose to break from England's authority, but, then, why had America felt a bond with them before then? Something strange had happened back in those days that America couldn't identify, but he remembered times where it felt as if he were being pulled in two directions as he struggled to reconcile the interests of his native peoples with those of his colonists. The pressure had nearly destroyed him.

"I'm fine," America said with a smile. "Just thinking about stuff."

"What sort of 'stuff'?" Wampanoag asked.

"Just…stuff."

"Would this 'stuff' have anything to do with why you finally chose to invite all your coworkers and friends to our Thanksgiving?"

"Jeez, nothing does get by you, huh?"

"When you've been around as long as I have, you just sort of know how to sense these things." Wampanoag gave him a reassuring smile and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Well?"

America gave a short sigh.
"I wasn't actually certain about inviting the other nations, at first," he said. "But Colorado can be very convincing."

"Come on, kid, don't try and fool me. You've been wanting to do this for a while, now. Didn't need your daughter to convince you."

"Fine, fine. I've wanted to have everyone get together for ages. We all needed to clear the air, once and for all. I… I don't like feeling as though I have to choose between the people I care about, and the only way to make it stop is to finally have everyone move on and make peace with each other."

Wampanoag just smiled again and shook his head fondly.

"I swear, you and Canada are so like Mother, sometimes…next thing you know, you'll be making everyone wear 'get along' parkas."

"What?"

"Never mind. You were too young to remember it. Whatever you hope to achieve with this party, I know your heart's in the right place, America. Just don't expect miracles with this crowd. There's a lot of bad blood lingering here. Only an hour ago, I had to break up a fight between Lenape and that Netherlands guy."

"Wait, Lenape? Our Lenni Lenape?"

"Yep."

"The same Lenape who always sits quietly in the corner with her sketchpad at every family gathering and barely says two words unless someone talks to her directly?"

"She's still a little bitter about Kieft's War."

That was an understatement if ever there was one. Lenape might be one of the quiet ones these days, but she had a proud warrior tradition that demanded satisfaction. In fact, that was one of the reasons why Kieft's War had been started, in the first place. And the Esopus Wars, too, for that matter.

America rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"This is going to be a mess, isn't it?" he said.

"Pretty much," Wampanoag said with a shrug. "All I can offer is a promise to intervene when I can and a word of advice. Keep the speech short and the booze flowing."

"I guess that's all I can ask for. Thanks, bro."

"Anytime, kid."

Some hours later, the states congregated together near to the stage where their father was due to speak. Some of their Canadian cousins were with them, too.

Washington and Yukon were both being glomped in an identical fashion by their little sisters, Alaska and Nunavut, respectively, and seemed to be silently wishing they could sneak away for a bit of private time with their favorite green leaf, some coffee, and a box of doughnuts. Quebec was talking in French with Louisiana about why English was such an inferior language and why Ontario and British Columbia were douchebags, in his opinion. New Brunswick and Florida were both talking about seashells and the importance of Vitamin C. Vermont and Saskatchewan just stood at the back,
silently fading in and out of visibility.

Massachusetts stood with Maine, excitedly chattering about how great the party was going that year, even if it did mean he had to breathe the same air as England. Maine just nodded mutely and took a swig from the large bottle of Moxie soda he had with him.

"...And, I mean, it's not like anything will evah match up to that original Thanksgiving," he said rather quickly. "And I don't mean the one with the Pilgrims or nothin', but that one given back in 1789 by the big man, himself. You know, when he thanked God for giving us independence...well, I guess you wouldn't know, Maurice. You didn't come along until latah. Anyway, that one was obviously the best, like I was telling Dad the othah day. I mean, I know everyone likes to talk about the Pilgrims and stuff, but that one was kinda messed up and I know that Ginny will try and ahgue about how, if we go by the colonial times, that she would be the home of the original Thanksgiving and you know I can't let that stand if we get into that old debate."

"Eh, feh," Maine responded.

"I know, right?"

"Anyone know when Dad's gonna start this thing?" Ohio asked.

"In a hurry, are you, Ohio?" said Kentucky.

"No. I just kinda want this mess over with. There's only so much I can take of watching Aunt Odawa hunting for a husband."

At that moment, they all noticed their aunt walk by, wielding her axe as she searched the area with hawk-like eyes. Odawa clearly hadn't given up on her pursuit of Switzerland from the other day, despite Ojibwe and Potawatomi attempting to reason with her. Wyandot hadn't exactly been helping, as he was just egging her on; he seemed to take it as a personal insult that one of his sisters was being rejected.

"Have you children seen the mercenary, anywhere?" Odawa asked the states.

"No, Auntie," several states and provinces replied.

"Hmph. He has to be around here, somewhere." She tapped the blunt end of the axe head against her free hand as she became thoughtful.

"Aunt Odawa," a nervous Saskatchewan said quietly. "You sure that an axe is an appropriate way of getting a husband, eh?"

"Of course I'm sure. It's not like we had dating websites in the sixteen-hundreds."

"I-I meant...is it legal to that, now, eh?"

Odawa blinked at her and then looked curiously at the axe in her hands.

"You have a point, there, girl," she said. "I could get sued! That would be dishonorable to my position as the Keeper of Trade!" She suddenly became very fretful, biting at her nails and rambling about budgets.

"This family is so freakin' weird, I swear to God," New Jersey muttered to herself.

"Hey, look, Daddy's startin' his speech," said Georgia, pointing up at the stage where America just
walked on. "Best hush up, ya'll, or we won't hear nothin'."

"Good evening, everyone," America said into the microphone. Unlike all the times he'd given speeches at world conferences, he wasn't talking with a hyperactive eagerness about superheroes and robots. He was strangely calm and almost solemn as he spoke, although he was smiling – albeit in a kind of oddly wistful way. Many of the nations were unsure of how to deal with this America.

"I would like to thank you all for coming here for our annual Thanksgiving party," he continued. "I know some of you weren't sure about coming. Some of you probably only decided to attend out of obligation or because you didn't want to be rude. And, for others, you didn't want to come because this day has some dark history hidden behind all the food and games.

"It's a day that has been shown either as a candy-coated tale of two different peoples getting along and becoming friends or else as a warning of how acts of kindness and charity were rewarded with betrayal, war, and death. The truth is…the truth is that both versions of this day aren't the whole story.

"Thanksgiving is derived from the practice of the harvest festival. It's a tradition which is present in almost every culture in the world to mark an important transition in the year. The beginning of the winter season. It's a time for contemplation and community. People are meant to bring what they can to the table and share their time with their neighbors, as surviving winter was a concern for everyone, not just individual families. It's when we stop to think about how grateful we are that we have made it through another year and what we can do to help our community in the approaching new year. This was how it was for many of the native peoples. This was how it was for the colonists. Most everyone had some form of annual festival at around this time of year.

"The official decision to make Thanksgiving a national holiday began with a proclamation by President George Washington in 1789. He called for a day of national 'thanks-giving' to be held on Thursday, the 26th of November. Its purpose was to remind the American people of the important things in life: Family, community, freedom…Washington had hoped for such a day to be made a national holiday long before he was ever president. He wanted it to stand as a day when the American people would think about those soldiers who died for them and of all they had to be grateful for.

"Over the years, people have lost sight of the original purpose of this celebration. To them, it's just a time to eat, watch a football game, and then get ready for the Christmas shopping rush. What was once an important time for everyone in the community is barely even worth remembering, now.

"This day is also tinged with bitterness and sorrow. The friendships and alliances that were initially brokered between the colonists and the native peoples were cruelly destroyed because of greed, prejudice, and misunderstandings. The event we most often associate with Thanksgiving, the meeting of the Wampanoag people and the Pilgrims in 1621, is a perfect example of when good intentions go wrong. How many times do we react to a situation without thinking of or caring about the consequences for other people? I know I have done things which have had done more harm than good, often without thinking – I am certain everyone here will agree with that, at least. I have made my apologies when I realized my mistakes, but there are some things which can never be forgotten and which it would take a miracle to forgive.

"So, this year, the thing I am most thankful for is forgiveness. Forgiveness from my siblings, my friends, my kids…I know it hasn't been easy putting up with me all these years, but I am thankful that, even after everything, you can forgive me for all the screw-ups I've made and for still being able to see the good things about me."
Many of the nations didn't know what to make of this insightful, well-spoken America. He'd never made such a coherent and cohesive speech at any of the conferences. Some of the nations were actually rather touched by his words as they had assumed he was too full of himself to ever admit to making mistakes. A few of the nations who knew America well understood that it was because America, despite his usual obliviousness, preferred to focus on the things that really, truly mattered to him. He was hardly about to talk like this about global warming or the national debt. America was, at his core, an emotionally-driven nation.

The tribes either smiled or maintained calm or somber expressions. All of them did agree, at least silently, that they loved their baby brother, no matter what had happened, because that was what you did in a family. And America, himself, wasn't entirely to blame for the crimes of the past, they knew. He was their land, their brother; he was the reason why they had fought so long against impossible odds. He and Canada both.

Some of the states had tears in their eyes. Others tried to just act as if it was just 'Dad being Dad' and shrug it off, while silently offering their own thanks for a father who cared so much.

America gave a sad smile and raised a glass – it was just apple cider, as he preferred to avoid alcohol at family gatherings so that he could remember everything clearly.

"This is to all of you," he said. "Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for the delay, but I've been a bit busy this last week. Helping my parents move, working on an essay (I was writing about superstition and witchcraft in colonial America), and I had to attend a wedding (I caught the bride's bouquet!). I'm also sorry about how fractured this chapter was, but I was desperate to get it done.

In the South, it is commonly accepted as fact that Northerners will never make pecan pie correctly (I, personally, wouldn't know as I don't care for pecan, but I do know it's kind of a Southern pride thing, same with red velvet cake).

As far as I know, there's no actual rivalry between Arkansas and South Carolina. I just wrote them like this because SC looks like England and Arkansas looks like France.

My interpretation of Maine is that he looks like he can kill you, can actually kill you, but is also a cinnamon roll. I expect no less from the home of Stephen King. Also, Moxie is the state drink of Maine.

Va te faire enculer – a very not nice thing to say to someone in French, essentially a form of "F- You."

I seem to recall reading in the Hetalia Wiki that Quebec is Canada's problem child. In my interpretation, he is incredibly rebellious, independent, and doesn't play nice with his siblings. He also isn't overly fond of people who don't speak French. No offense meant to any nice Quebecoise out there.

The sun dance is a rite practiced by several different Native American tribes, most notably the Plains cultures, that is meant to serve as a source of healing for the community via the personal sacrifices made by individuals. It typically involves fasting,
prayer with a ceremonial pipe, and, in some (but not all) cases, a ritual piercing of the chest. The US outlawed the sun dance until the late 1970s.

Kieft's War was a conflict between the colonists of New Netherland and the Lenape (Delaware) peoples that led to the near extinction of the Lenape and drove numerous Dutch settlers back to their homeland. This was later followed by the Esopus Wars.

An interesting point that struck me: America and Canada would be considered full-blooded Native Americans, as their mother was one and most NA tribes are matriarchal (status passed through mother rather than father), but none of the states or provinces would be considered full-blooded as their connection is solely through their respective fathers.
Dueling Pistols

Chapter Notes

Something, something disclaimer. Please remember, England and France are not friends.
Nope, not at all.
Also, in polite society, it is generally considered rude to snoop through another person's belongings.
And, again, nothing in this fic is intended to cause offense. I am simply trying to keep with the historical context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Bloody twit," England muttered half-heartedly to himself after America's little speech.

America was so different from what he was used to. Not the babbling, airheaded idiot who couldn't read the atmosphere to save his life but a damaged young man seasoned by truly awful experiences. That wasn't how it was supposed to be. America was supposed to just strut into the limelight and make a bunch of cheery exclamations about friendship and why he was the hero. This other side of America…well, it frightened England, if he was completely honest.

Ever since the states had been revealed, America had been acting differently from what England knew. Or, perhaps, the truth of the matter was, America wasn't as happy-go-lucky when away from the eyes of the world? England knew America could be serious when the situation demanded it, he'd seen darkness in his former brother's eyes and a cold ruthlessness on the battlefield; it was something England tried his best to forget about America. But he'd never seen a broken, contrite America who actually asked for forgiveness for things he'd done.

No matter how much England liked to get on America's case about his mistakes, seeing America accept responsibility for what he'd done in the past just seemed…well, maybe not wrong, exactly, but it was certainly not reassuring.

England idly poked at the food on his plate. It wasn't what he'd expected, either. In fact, it was reminiscent of what he often had at Christmas dinner. Turkey, stuffing, potatoes, and such. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Irelands absconding with a whole pot of mashed potatoes, themselves (England still remembered the day America was first handed a potato by Erin and Patrick – despite being part of the New World, America had never seen one before, as potatoes originated in Peru – and soon gained the same fascination with the spud that the Irelands had).

England watched America step down from the stage and walk off. Somehow, in the intervening seconds it took for him to walk down the steps, America had acquired South Korea groping him from behind like some kind of human limpet ("Sentimental speeches originated in South Korea, da-ze!").

"Having fun, Angleterre?" came a familiar and very unwelcome voice.

"Piss off, France," he snapped, though without the level of venom he normally injected into his conversations with the Frenchman.

France ignored the remark and, still smiling in that superior way of his, took a seat beside the irate
island nation.

"I have been having a lovely time, myself," France continued. "I found many old friends of mine."

England scowled bitterly at that, knowing what France was speaking of. Back during the days of colonization, France had had a much better working relationship with the native peoples. Most of them ended up turning to England for trade, though, as he offered cheaper goods of better quality; however, most of the tribes had sided with France during the French and Indian War just because they 'liked France better as a person.' That's not to say all of the tribes liked France; Wyandot (whom France used to call 'Huron') was one of France's 'old friends,' which, consequently, meant the Iroquois tribes didn't like him.

"And I have been pleasantly surprised that dear Amérique and his children were not burdened with your atrocious cooking skills, as I had feared," France added.

"There's nothing wrong with my cooking," England retorted.

"It really is amazing to think of how grown up America has become," France continued, pretending not to have heard England's comment. "I suppose, to have raised so many children almost entirely by himself, he couldn't be as clueless as we thought."

Bloody hell, England thought to himself. Why did France have to start making sense? Everything was so damned topsy-turvy, at the moment.

"Why won't you piss off, already?" England said sharply. "We're not friends. Go bother Spain and Prussia."

"Ah, England, you wound me so," France said with a dramatic sigh. "And, I'm afraid, the others are preoccupied elsewhere."

In point of fact, the other two members of the Bad Touch Trio were watching the bit of entertainment that Texas had arranged for the event. The girl had apparently found the biggest, toughest, meanest bulls in her state and decided to have a little rodeo.

"So, I was wondering, mon cher," France continued. "Perhaps a little – what is that word? – 'snooping' would cheer you up?"

"I beg your pardon?" England said in disbelief.

"Well, I know how much you enjoy prying into other's business-"

"Just what are you implying, Frog?!"

"Oh, come now, Angleterre. Don't expect me to believe you aren't interested in learning more of America's secrets. Everyone is so distracted, right now, it would be easy to sneak into the house and do some investigating."

England was in a serious quandary. On the one hand, he was dying to know what other things America was keeping from him and England's inner spy was practically ordering him to do some intelligence-gathering; plus, Texas seemed to be the state with the most knowledge of what happened with Mexico, at least. On the other hand, it was France who suggested it and it would mean being alone with him for the duration. However, his insatiable curiosity won out.

"Fine," England said shortly. "But if this turns out to be one of your little schemes to molest me while my back is turned-"
"Oh, England, really. When have I ever done anything so dishonorable?"

The smile on France's face left England with the impression that butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth.

England and France covertly made their way up to Texas's house. Everyone was too enraptured by the sight of the girl, in question, calmly sitting on the back of a raging bull as if it were no more than one of those coin-operated children's rides at the grocery store to pay England and France any mind. As they passed by the crowd, England couldn't help but notice that Australia was chatting up a few of America's sisters, all of whom were cooing over the koala he had with him, and, next to him, New Zealand was also being mobbed by several other girls who appeared to be fixated on his curly hair and saying how 'cute' he was (the poor lad was blushing bright red under the unusual amount of attention).

With everyone outside, save for a few states running in and out with large amounts of food, England and France were able to infiltrate the building with no one being the wiser. It was a sizable estate, however, so navigating the many rooms proved challenging just from sheer quantity despite the layout of the property being fairly simple.

Eventually, however, England discovered the door to the storage room on an accident. He'd leaned against it, thinking it was just the door to a closet or something, only for the slightly rusty latch to give way and cause him to tumble backwards down the short wooden steps into the dusty old room.

"Ah, England," France said with an amused smile, "It appears you have fumbled your way to success, yet again."

"Shut up," England groaned as he got to his feet and brushed himself off.

France flipped the light switch at the top of the stairs before stepping down into the room.

"Best spread out," England said. "We can cover more ground."

Also, it meant less of an opportunity for France to grope him or otherwise invade his personal space if he was on the opposite end of the room.

France just gave him a sly wink and walked over to a set of old boxes. England gave him a suspicious glare but went off the other way.

While France was not normally one for sifting through dusty old crates, as it meant getting dirt on his gorgeous clothes and ruining his manicured nails, he was sincerely interested in digging up the information that America seemed intent on hiding. England might think he had some ulterior motive for dragging him off on this little venture, but, in truth, most of France's verbal jabs and coaxing had been intended solely to provoke England's own interest (and to get a rise out of the stuffy nation, as it was so much fun to watch him sputter and fume) as France would admit that England was actually rather talented at finding out secrets, no matter how well they were concealed.

As France suspected, England quickly found something significant. It was a collection of old photographs, the oldest of which were daguerreotypes.

One picture showed a pair of little girls in matching, frilly white dresses and crucifix necklaces. On the back of the picture was written: 'Tejas y Alta California, 1842.' While Texas was rather recognizable, with her messy braid and proud smile, California was not. California's hair was dark and curly, rather than the straight, bottle-blonde it currently was, and she was smiling shyly and almost demurely out of the image.
There were a few other pictures, most of them taken much later – closer to the end of the century – when the girls had grown up at a rate comparable to that of their father. In quite a few of the pictures, Texas looked strangely withdrawn and tired while California looked a little more like her current self, flashier and clearly possessing little regard for the propriety of the late 1800s if her exposed ankles were anything to go by.

It clicked rather sharply for England that anything between 1846 and 1865 was very specifically not included in that particular collection.

Poking through some other boxes, England found a few painted portraits of Texas, California, and some other children that he could only assume were Mexico's states. There was one painting, bearing the label 'Córdoba, August 24, 1821,' that showed a woman, who was clearly Mexico, with a pair of toddlers by her side (whom England recognized as Texas and California) signing a treaty. England's knowledge of Mexico's history wasn't extensive, but he made a point of remembering the date that Spain's most prized colony finally kicked him out, as the Spaniard had consistently mocked England for losing America every single year from 1781 until Mexico got her own independence.

England set those aside for the moment and turned to the other boxes. Soon, he found a large wooden chest with a star carved into its lid. Thankfully, it wasn't locked and England opened it easily.

The first thing he found, covering the other contents, was a folded flag. It was dark blue with a large, white star emblazoned on it. After carefully picking it up, a yellowed slip of paper fell out, which England caught. He quickly glanced over the words printed on it and realized they were the lyrics to a song:

Then here's to our Confederacy, strong we are and brave,
Like patriots of old we'll fight, our heritage to save;
And rather than submit to shame, to die we would prefer,
So cheer for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a single star.

Hurrah! Hurrah!

For Southern rights, hurrah!

Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a single star.

"Find something, mon cher?"

"Bloody hell, France," England exclaimed. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"My apologies," France said, sounding anything but sincere. "Well, did you find something?"

"I think so. Here, hold these."

England carefully handed the flag and the paper to France and continued poking through the chest. More photographs, labeled as being from the 1860s, showed Texas and several of America's Southern states in stiff military uniforms staring coldly out of the images. Then there were the letters, stacks of them bound up in faded red ribbon. England carefully took one out, opened it, and began to read aloud.

July, 1863
My darling Bluebonnet,

Your last letter found us at our wit's end, I must say. Far from the decisive victory we had hoped for to bring one of the others under our banner, I have found myself relegated to the position of field nurse for those who managed to escape Gettysburg with their lives. Our dear Virginia has yet to heal from the hole that was shot into her head. This couples with the already severe wound she sustained about a month ago, which I mentioned in my last letter, that I am sure you recall with your usual exceptional clarity. In addition to this, we reconnoitered with Alabama and what few men he had left after Ohio routed him in Salineville; though his injuries are more a matter of wounded pride than anything else. Have you had word yet from Arkansas? You know as well as I do that Noah is not inclined to cease a fight under any circumstances and I fear what might become of him, especially considering how I doubt his honor will allow him to sit back and do nothing while our Mississippi is so cruelly besieged.

Mother has commanded us to withdraw and our intention is now to fight this war on the defensive. I shall be returning to Savannah for the foreseeable future, but I fear that the sounds of Northern boots shall soon be heard even on the banks of the Ogeechee River. I am afraid, my dear sister. I am afraid of what this war is costing us, I am afraid of how far our own kin will go to bring us back into the fold, and, though I am reluctant to admit it, I am afraid of Mother. You have been fighting in the Western Theater this last year and have not seen the changes that have come over the woman we know and love so well. I urge you, in the strongest possible sense, to return to us, forthwith, and to try and talk some sense into her as she has rebuffed any advice which the rest of us have presented, especially in light of Virginia's present condition.

You know I am not the superstitious sort like those New England Yankees, but I have felt something is very wrong of late. There is a bad air lurking in the winds. I believe there is every likelihood that the source of our misfortune lies not only to the North, but in our very midst, as well.

Hoping to see you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Belle Jones

England stared at France and France stared back at England. The two of them silently agreed that they should put everything back and leave. There was one more thing in the chest besides the pictures and letters, however. A lacquered box. It sat there in the chest, benign and yet almost mocking. England couldn't help it. As soon as he'd gently folded the letter back up and placed it back with the others, he picked up the box and opened it.

The dim light struck the metal of a matched pair of pistols. The pistols were clearly high quality and likely very expensive, if the silver and pearl decorations on them were anything to go by. They weren't just any set of pistols, however. They were dueling pistols. The kind of thing men would use to settle matters of honor back before the practice was made illegal (and, sometimes, even after the fact).

"Pretty little things, ain't they?" said a soft voice behind them.

England and France whipped around and saw Texas watching them with a strangely blank expression. The two nations had the decency to look rather shamefaced. After all, they had just been caught looking through her personal affects without her permission while they were guests in her home. Both of them were not holding very high hopes at that moment of being permitted to leave the property without some of their limbs missing. Texas, however, just walked up and held out her hands for the box, which England immediately handed over. Texas's eyes lingered on the weapons for a
"These were hers," she said.

"Whose?" England replied.

"South's." Texas's gaze moved up to the male nations who were still riveted to the spot and silently praying the young cowgirl wouldn't beat the ever-loving hell out of them. Her expression didn't change, though, and England could see a resemblance between the current Texas and the one in the photographs taken in the years following the Civil War.

Texas gave a tired sigh and gently put the box away, taking the blue flag back from France, and sealing them back inside the chest.

"People don't like to talk about her," Texas continued. "Daddy gets real defensive whenever you mention her within earshot of him. And Mexico…heh, well, I'm sure you've seen how Mexico gets whenever South is brought up. Old rivalries die hard, after all."

England finally found his voice again.

"Miss Texas, I wish to apologize for our intrusion," he said. "It was highly inappropriate."

Texas just waved him off.

"Missouri told me ya'll had been pryin' into what happened," she said. "Can't say I blame ya for bein' curious. Pull up a seat and I'll give you a few of the details. Not everythin', mind, but enough to see you through until Daddy finally pulls his head outta where the sun ain't shinin'."

England and France quickly dusted off a couple of sturdy crates and sat down as Texas began her story.

"I didn't know her until around the 1840s," said Texas. "By then, she was already goin' by the name 'American South,' seein' as what she was before then didn't technically exist anymore, and had been married to Daddy since around the beginnin' of that century. Her human name was 'Louise Annette Dubois,' until she married Daddy and took on his surname."

England threw a furtive look at France.

"Sounds French," he muttered.

"Sounds lovely, I think you mean," France said shortly.

"Yeah, well," Texas said with a shrug. "Lots of her folks were Frenchie. I ain't exactly fond of the culture, myself." She gave France a piercing look of her own. "Seein' as you were only able to colonize my land for five years before your fella La Salle got whacked by his own men."

"Ha!" England exclaimed, pointing at France's pouting face.

"May I continue?" Texas said a little impatiently.

"Oh, yes, my apologies."

"As I was sayin', I met her in the 1840s. She'd written to me a few times before I launched my Revolution. Actually, she was the one pushin' for me to leave Mexico, in the first place. Daddy just tried to haggle visitin' rights and sent troops to help me out when Mexico got into a war with Uncle Comanche, but South…South always told me how much she wanted me to come home, to be with
the rest of the family. The first time I met her in person, I was recoverin' from what Mexico did to me at the Alamo. South held my hand as they were pullin' out the bullets and told me everythin' was gonna be all right.

"If you talk to some of my other siblin's, especially the Northerners, they'll try to paint South as a monster. They'll focus only on what she did wrong and what was goin' on with her in those final years. They only remember her as the Confederate States of America. But as for me, I know better."

England and France shared another look. England had suspected ever since his conversation with Missouri that America's wife had been the Confederate States; however, he hadn't been able to figure out how she was with America for so long when the Confederacy only existed for a few years.

"So, that is why Mexico hates her?" France asked. "Because she convinced you to leave?"

"Oh, no, Mexico and South hated each other way before I ever came along," said Texas. "Even I don't know the whole story, but, seein' as I lived between the two for so long, I could tell a lot about what they hated about each other."

"Like what?" said England.

"Well, Mex always said that South was a 'greedy, spoiled, snobbish bruja, who never lifted a finger to earn what she had.' And South said that Mexico was an 'unrefined, self-righteous tramp who couldn't keep her paws off someone else's husband.' Uh, there were a few more comments like that, but they ain't the type of thing I can repeat in polite company."

"So, Amérique and Mexico were together while he was married to South?" said France. "I honestly did not think the boy had such a wandering eye."

"Hey," Texas said, her face turning a bit red and her narrowing angrily. "Don't make it sound like Daddy was runnin' around chasin' skirts, 'cause that ain't what happened. It was because of that Adams-Onís Treaty back in 1819. Daddy was negotiatin' borders and had a little bit too much to drink one night. He says he doesn't remember what happened other than someone walkin' him up to his room. Nine months later, he and South got a letter from Mexico sayin' that me and California were born."

"Wait a moment," France's expression was rather ashen. "Do you mean to say that Mexico took advantage of America while he was drunk?"

"Well, me and California weren't born from coincidence. Especially as we weren't recognized as states or nothin' at the time. And Daddy, for all his faults, ain't exactly a womanizer."

"That is terrible!"

France sincerely was devastated. He had mistaken America's reluctance to discuss his romantic life as shyness and had subsequently teased the boy about it. While people often believed France's forwardness to be deliberate harassment and took him to be little more than a pervert, the nation of love did stand by his motto that love should not be forced on someone.

"And what of your younger siblings?" England said. "Mexico said that she and America had several children together."

"Ah, that would be Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona," Texas said with a nod. "Nevada was born durin' the Civil War. That time…Daddy really did stray. He was lettin' Mexico run a strategic post out of the Southwest when she was tryin' to take back her land from Francy-pants, here. Daddy was out that way, himself, tryin' to route me and Arkansas in the Western Theater. He and Mexico…well,
I guess one thing just led to another. I think… I think he did it because he wanted to hurt South for what she'd done, leadin' the rest of us into a rebellion and all. Who's to say, though? People do some really awful shit when they're angry, or sad, or in pain.

"As for New Mexico and Arizona. Well, after we entered the new century, Daddy and Mexico actually tried to have a real relationship with each other. Didn't last, though, and, after the First World War and the Zimmerman Telegram, he found it hard to ever trust that she wasn't just out to take me, Cali, and the others back."

England and France didn't know what to say. They'd personally experienced complicated political and emotional situations, things that were sometimes so terrible that they barely emerged from them alive; however, they never thought America, with as little history he had in comparison with them, would have been through anything so dramatic.

"Don't go pityin' Daddy, though," Texas said firmly. "He's beat himself up about it enough and he's got his pride to maintain. He'll talk about it, eventually, but don't push him to tell you everythin' right off the bat.

"Now, I do believe we are missin' a party, gentlemen." She waved her hand towards the steps. "After ya'll."

England and France saw the hard spark in her eyes and knew it wouldn't be worth it to try and ask anything further, at the moment, and so followed her direction to vacate the room. Texas paused for a moment and looked back at the mountains of dusty boxes.

"Need to do a li'l storage room cleanin', soon," she said to herself. She'd tried to do so in the past, but there was so much stuff in there that she could never get through it all. And she could never bring herself to throw anything out.

England and France found it very difficult to act as though nothing was different. Several times, England had to elbow France in the side when he threw a glare at Mexico (who did not notice the Frenchman's ire). While he shared his archrival's shock over what had apparently happened to America, England knew from experience that you couldn't take one person's version of events as the whole of the story. He very much doubted that Mexico was the homewrecker that Texas was inclined to imply she was, but something certainly did happen – and England was determined to find out everything.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Please note, there is more to Mexico and America's story than what Texas tells England and France. Texas is only telling them what she, personally, knows of the situation; however, I intend to write a chapter later on explaining Mexico's side of the story. Relationships are complicated things (especially in the 1800s) and neither America, nor Mexico, nor South was wholly guilty or wholly innocent in what happened.

Sorry if the speech wasn't all that great in the last chapter, but I'm not a professional speechwriter. My point was to show that America has a great deal of internal conflict that he doesn't like to show to the rest of the world, but which always comes out around Thanksgiving and other kinds of remembrance days (which is why he avoided inviting
As a personal note: My mother once lived in England for a little while. While she was there, she visited some of her cousins (we have extended family in England) and, when it came time for Thanksgiving, she offered to cook them a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, as they'd never had one before. They were actually kind of disappointed because, according to one of the cousins, 'it's just like Christmas dinner,' and they were hoping for something strange and exotic.

Bet you all didn't know that the first potatoes brought to North America came from Ireland and were planted in Londonderry, New Hampshire in 1719. The potato may be of New World origin, but it was largely confined to South America until the Spanish showed up (in North America, the main staples of agrarian communities were maize, beans, and squash, known as the "Three Sisters").

The French had a much better relationship with the Native Americans than the English did. The French traders were generally very polite, inclusive, and willing to give gifts to their native allies, whereas the English traders often treated the natives with contempt and just expected them to do business solely because English-made goods were better and cheaper than French goods. Of course, the government of New Orleans decided that the best way of controlling the people in the region was to turn the whites, blacks, and natives against each other, so the relationship between France and the Indians wasn't always sunshine and rainbows, either.

Am I the only one who thinks Hetalia's New Zealand character is adorable?

The original flag of the Confederacy was the Bonnie Blue. A plain blue flag with a single white star. The song "Bonnie Blue Flag" was written by Harry McCarthy in 1861. The Bonnie Blue was later replaced by the Stars and Bars, which is most similar to the flag of Georgia. The flag most people think is the flag of the Confederacy (and which they mislabel as the Stars and Bars) is the one with the big X-shape on it, which is actually the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia (and of a couple other groups, including a division in Tennessee), but that was never the official flag of the Confederacy.

France colonized Texas for five years. The local people didn't take kindly to that. La Salle (the famous French explorer) was the founder of the colony and was killed as the result of a mutiny when he and his men tried to go for help. The only survivors of those left behind in the colony were five children who were taken by the natives until they were ransomed to the Spanish.

The Adams-Onís Treaty was an agreement signed by the United States and Spain acknowledging that the U.S. relinquished any claims to Texas from the Louisiana Purchase in exchange for Florida.
That last chapter got kind of heavy. I think we all need a dose of Vitamin C to cheer us up. Again, sorry if things are a little rushed, I am trying to push through to the end of the Thanksgiving arc.

Also, folks, remember not to be shy with those reviews (which is my pitiful, pathetic way of saying 'please, love me and acknowledge me').

A couple of the states decided to hold a little talent show to wrap up the Thanksgiving party.

Mississippi and Tennessee had a rock and roll throw-down that, as of yet, still had no clear-cut winner. Missouri and Georgia played a beautiful duet on their fiddles. Rhode Island attempted to do a magic act, which backfired when he tried to reach into his magician's hat and somehow fell into an alternate dimension he'd opened up instead (Louisiana had to summon him back). Everyone stared in a mix of awe and horror when Alaska began juggling chainsaws. California had to be removed from the stage when she tried to do her ping-pong ball trick. The less said about Connecticut's standup comedy routine the better.

Ohio was currently onstage with a piano.

"I will now play 'Those Endearing Young Charms,'" he said.

"Oh, no," America said quietly. "I know exactly where this is going."

Ohio tapped out the notes of the song before slipping up on a couple. This prompted an irritated Illinois to shout: "That's wrong, yuh moron! Try it again!"

Ohio played the notes again, making the same mistake. Illinois then rushed onto the stage and shoved Ohio out of the way.

"No, no, yuh idiot!" he snapped. "Like this!"

Illinois then furiously played the song correctly. However, when he hit the notes that Ohio had messed up, the piano exploded, leaving a somewhat charred Illinois standing there. Everyone familiar with Looney Tunes burst out laughing.

"Thanks for your assistance, Illinois," said Ohio with a smile. "I knew I could count on you." He smiled at the audience. "Let's give a big hand to my little bro for being such a good sport!"

Illinois glared at him and said, "Yuh're despicable."

The audience applauded loudly. The curtain came down on the stage and a brief interval was announced as the next act required various props to be moved on.

"Is it always like this for your family, aru?" China asked America.
"Pretty much," America said with a shrug. Which was rather difficult to do, as South Korea was still holding onto him. "Hey, South Korea?"

"Yes, America?" said South Korea.

"You gonna let go of me anytime soon?"

"Not until I have hugged away all your sorrow, da-ze!"

"…Does that require you to have your hands on my chest?"

"Yes."

"South Korea," China snapped. "You are making an embarrassment of yourself in front of the Westerners. Stop groping America, aru."

South Korea pouted and hugged America tighter. China was about to snap at him, again, when they were interrupted by the sight of Spain and Prussia riding in on one of Texas's bulls, which they had commandeered while everyone was distracted with the talent show (and which they soon found they couldn't control as easily as they'd hoped). South Korea and China screamed as the bull charged towards them and ducked behind America. America, for his part, simply quirked a brow and proceeded to take the bull by the horns…literally. Considering the fact that America was swinging bison around since he could barely walk, a little bitty bull was hardly a challenge to lift into the air. He gave the creature a gentle shake, causing Spain and Prussia to tumble to the ground, and then called Wyoming over – as he was the closest state at the time.

"Just take him back to his pen," America said.

"Do your buddies need any first aid?" said Wyoming as he gave the shaking European countries a quick glance.

"They'll be fine."

"Spain, you Tomato-Bastard!" Romano yelled furiously as he stormed over to Spain and smacked him upside the head. "How dare you do something so stupid!"

As Romano launched into another rant at his former guardian, Wyoming just hefted the still rather pissed-off bull onto his shoulder and walked away whistling. America and Prussia both snickered at Spain's predicament.

"Hey, Papi!" a cheery voice called out, prompting America to turn and smile at the newcomer.

The nations with America were once again rendered speechless as another state with a familiar face made his appearance. This one looked like Spain. A lot like Spain. Like a sixteen-year-old Spain with slightly darker skin and hair and with eyes of a lighter shade of green, but still. The only really odd thing about him was that he had a stray lock of hair that curled upwards and which had a white streak in it. He was dressed rather flamboyantly, with an orange polo shirt with floral patterns, tan canvas shorts, and flip-flops. He also wore a rather gaudy necklace with a moonstone pendant and shark teeth and he had an earring in his left ear that had what looked like a gold doubloon dangling from it.

"Oh, hey, Florida," America waved the boy over.

Florida tackle-hugged his father and America responded by pulling him into a headlock.
"Hey, the sun is shining, can you believe it?" America said lightly.

"Today is a great day," Florida replied with a wide smile. "It's Saint Somebody's Day, but you don't know which one and neither do I."

"What does the wallpaper need?"

"Eels!" they said together.

America released Florida and ruffled his hair. Florida pulled a basket of oranges out of somewhere, picked one out, and began to eat it.

"Oh, God, no," Romano grumbled. "There's two of them. You know what? Fuck this, I'm not dealing with this shit, today."

Romano stomped off in the direction of the tent where the booze was being distributed.

"What've you been up to, my dude?" America asked his son, oblivious to the odd looks from the other nations.

"Well, Papi, I have mostly been saying 'hola' to our South American friends," said Florida. He then frowned slightly. "Most of them started acting really weird when they saw me, though."

"Oh, really?"

"Sí. Señor Argentina even threatened to beat me with a wine bottle if I came anywhere near him."

"That's just Argentina. He's always been a little odd."

"Ha, I just remembered something funny that Señorita Chile told me. She said that Argentinians are Italians who think that they are Germans."

Oddly enough, it was Prussia who found that comment the funniest and clutched at his sides as he cackled loudly. It was a little known fact that Prussia had briefly hidden out at Argentina's place after WWII, due to his lack of extradition treaties, and he knew, firsthand, what the South American nation was like.

"Oh, are these more of your friends, Papi?" said Florida, pointing at the other couple of nations.

"Yep. Dudes, this is my son Florida. Florida, these are China, South Korea, Prussia, and Spain."

Something seemed to spark in Florida's eyes when America mentioned Spain. The southernmost American state's gaze became fixed on his former colonizer and his smile turned rather eerie.

"Hola, amigos," Florida said with an unnerving calmness.

"Hello," said a cheery South Korea, who completely failed to read the tense atmosphere. "I have heard about you, da-ze. Aren't you the state with Disneyland?"


A passing California and New Jersey happened to hear that comment and froze before simultaneously shouting, "Bitch!" Florida ignored them, his eyes still boring holes into Spain, who fidgeted under the intense look. Suddenly, there was a strange hissing sound. Florida blinked and then reached into his shirt and pulled out a humongous Burmese python.
"Señor Strangles," Florida said sternly to the snake. "What are you doing here? I thought I left you in Georgia's flower garden."

Somewhere in the distance, Georgia felt an angry twinge go up her spine which prompted her to snap the spoon in her hand.

"You had better not be causing trouble," Florida continued. "I don't want you fighting with Fluffy and Cuddles."

"Fluffy and Cuddles?" the nations asked.

Florida gave a quick whistle and two large, hulking reptiles skittered across the ground to encircle Florida and glare up at the python. One was an alligator and the other a crocodile.

"Ay, dios mío!"

"Aiyah!"

"Verdammt!"

"Domestication of reptiles originated in South Korea, da-ze!"

"Fernando, I hope you didn't bring too many of your pets with you," America said, completely unfazed by the sight of the deadly creatures surrounding his son.

"Clara brings her dogs everywhere and no one bats an eye," Florida protested.

"Not everyone is as comfortable around Mr. Strangles, Fluffy, and Cuddles as you and I are, dude. And you know some of your other pets aren't as well behaved."

"I didn't bring all of them, Papi! And I left most of my kitties with that Greek amigo of yours. He seemed really happy when I showed them to him."

At that moment, Greece walked by at a slow, contented pace. He was covered almost head-to-toe in clinging little balls of fur and had a serene expression on his face.

"Oh, hello, Florida," Greece said in his usual monotone. "Thank you for introducing me to your cats."

"Hey, no problem, Señor," said Florida. "Anyone who likes animals is more than welcome at my place."

One of the little creatures released its hold on Greece and, completely disregarding the alligator, crocodile, and python, bounded over to Florida and mewed at him expectantly. Florida smiled and picked it up.

"Hola, Freckles," he said, nuzzling the kitten.

"The Awesome Me has to admit that is a cute cat," said Prussia, who was leaning in as close as he dared with the much larger, deadlier animals at Florida's feet. "It almost looks like a baby jaguar."

"...It is a baby jaguar."

"America, why on earth would you let your son have such dangerous beasts, aru?" said China in total disbelief.
"Florida knows what he's doing," said America.

Freckles the jaguar kitten swiped its little, razor-sharp claws affectionately at Florida's face. Florida chuckled and dodged the gesture which, had it made contact, would easily have ripped his face off.

"America, I have to ask," said China with deep worry on his face, "And, please answer me honestly, aru."

"Yeah, dude?"

"Are all your children completely insane, aru?"

"What are you talking about, China? My kids are all perfectly normal."

"Oh, there's Alabama," said Florida. He handed Freckles off to Greece again – who soon curled up on a nearby bench and fell asleep with all the wild cats on him – and then began searching one of the pockets on his shorts. He withdrew a slingshot and a smelly, rotting, dead fish. Taking careful aim, Florida fired the fish at Alabama's head.

Alabama shrieked and tripped in shock.

"Who's responsible… I say, who's responsible for this unwarranted attack on my person?!" Alabama shouted.

"Okay, so Fernando is a little special," said America. "He's just really diverse, okay?"

"Yeah, big brother," said South Korea. "Be more respectful of other people's cultures, like me, da-zel!"

"Anyone who can tame wild animals is pretty awesome," said Prussia. "Not as awesome as me, of course. Or as awesome as mein awesome goddaughter. Which reminds me." Prussia pulled out a large pack of beers. "Later, losers. The Awesome Me is going to go teach Pennsylvania even more things about being awesome."

America would have attempted to stop him, considering the last time Prussia and Pennsylvania went on a beer-fueled rampage. However, Massachusetts and Ohio were on standby in case she went overboard, again, and they were equipped with enough Hershey's chocolate to choke an elephant and enough sheet music to run a symphonic orchestra's entire season, so America wasn't too worried.

"Ay, I have to get moving, myself," said Florida, checking his watch. "I am next for the talent contest. Papi, before I do, I wanted to know if you could watch the niños."

"Sure, Sunshine-dude."

"Oh, gracias, Papi, I will just go and get them."

Florida hurried off somewhere and the remaining nations looked at America, once more.

"America," said Spain. "Why does Florida look so much like me?"

"Huh? What do you mean, Spanish-dude? Fernando doesn't look like you."

"He looks almost as much like me as that Arkansas boy looks like France."

America blinked a few times, as if trying to mentally process what Spain had just said.
"I don't see the resemblance."

China smacked America upside the head.

"You cannot be this dense, aru!" said China. "He looks just like Spain except for that white hair curl."

"You mean Palm Beach?" said America. At their blank looks, America pointed to his own strange curl. "It's like my Nantucket. His is white because of all the old people he has."

"Old people?" said South Korea. "You mean like China, da-ze?"

"This is so much disrespect!" China snapped at him.

"Florida has the largest population of senior citizens in the country," said America. "In fact, his Sumter County has a median age of sixty-two, I believe. Plus, he is technically the eldest of all my states, if you go by colonial settlement. Don't mention that all to him, though. His siblings always tease him about it."

"Okay, Papi, here they are," Florida called out as he returned.

With him were two children. There was a pretty little girl standing by his side. She looked to be about nine years old and had beach blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, green eyes like her father, and tan skin with darker freckles on her cheeks. She was wearing brightly-colored clothes and a seashell necklace and was currently sucking on a green, lime-flavored lollipop. The second child was a boy who Florida was holding under his arm as the child seemed to be furiously struggling in his hold. The only way to describe the boy was that he looked like a six-year-old Spain-England hybrid with his tan skin, messy brown hair, emerald green eyes, and enormous eyebrows. The boy was dressed in a stiff, red uniform that looked faintly reminiscent of the uniforms worn by British soldiers during the days of imperialism.

"Unhand me at once, you damn wanker!" the boy screamed. His tone was frighteningly similar to England's, though his accent was like that of an American attempting to speak with a stereotypical English accent.

"Thanks for looking after them, Papi," said Florida. "I don't like leaving them alone too long. You kids be good for your abuelo, you hear?"

"Sure, Dad," said the girl. "Like, whatever."

"Bueno. I'll be back in a bit."

Florida set the struggling boy on the ground and then left once again. By now, the other nations looked as though their jaws would soon hit the floor.

"America," said Spain carefully. "Did I just hear what he said correctly?"

"What?" said America.

"I think what he means," China added. "Is 'who are those kids,' aru?"

"Oh, these are my grandkids. They're my micronations." He put his hand on the girl's shoulder first. "This is Denise Jones."

"Conch Republic. And, remember," the girl said with a warning look at the nations. "It is
pronounced like 'konk' not 'con-sch.'" She then smiled a hundred-watt, all-American smile. "I'm also Key West. And I am totally my own country, no matter what Gramps tells you. I even fought wars with him."

America left it unsaid that those 'wars' were a military training operation and two different protests. "And this is Richard Jones," America added, resting his other hand on the boy's shoulder.

The boy scowled and shrugged it off. "I am the Dominion of British West Florida," he said in a pompous, high-pitched voice. "I am not so much a nation as a rightful member of the Commonwealth. My esteemed duke is pursuing our rightful recognition as part of the British Empire and reestablishment as subjects of Her Majesty the Queen."

"There is no way in hell I am letting Iggy anywhere near you," America muttered to himself. "It would go right to his tea-loving head."

"America, do you mean to tell us that you are a grandfather, da-ze?" said South Korea. "It was shocking enough that you have kids, but grandkids, too?"

"Well, I told you. They're my micronations. I know some of you guys have micronations, too. It's not that weird. Besides, just look at how cute they are."

"You bloody arse, just cede me back to British Empire, already!" said British West Florida.

"I am so ready to have another war," said Conch Republic with an annoyed huff. "Life is getting boring without one."

"Hola, everyone!" Florida announced from the stage. "I will now delight you all with an act I call 'Canaveral Carnival.'"

The curtains drew back on the stage, revealing a collection of brightly-colored slopes, slides, hoops, pools, and other accoutrements. Florida then proceeded to strap a pair of what appeared to be roller-skates with rockets attached to them onto his feet, fastened on a star-spangled helmet, and positioned himself at the starting point. Florida lit a match and reached down to ignite the rockets.

"Cinco…cuatro…tres…dos…uno!"

Everyone stared, transfixed, as he shot up a ramp, through a loop-de-loop, over a pool filled with snapping alligators, through flaming hoops, through another loop-de-loop, up a vertical slope that was cut off at the top, into the air, then plummeting back down towards earth, landing on the top of a slide just as the spark was beginning to die in his rocket skates, down the slide which was cut off at the bottom like a ski-jump, grabbing a pair of sparklers from the sides of the end of the slide, shooting up over the audience, and sticking a perfect landing in the middle of a target that was revealed to be nothing less than a gigantic Key lime pie, sending bits of the dessert everywhere as he made impact.

Wiping residual lime curd and cream off his face, Florida smiled at the dumbstruck audience. No one was entirely certain how to react to the bizarre display until America began whooping and hollering. "That's my Florida!" he shouted proudly.

The nations soon joined in as they would admit it was a very impressive feat. Quite a few of the
England and France still weren't sure about how to approach America over what they had learned from Texas. As the party was beginning to wrap up, however, they felt they needed to at least speak with him before they left. They found him congratulating Florida on his talent act – which England and France had found terrifying and vaguely disturbing – and hesitantly walked over to them just as the two micronations looked Florida over for injuries.

"Don't scare us like that, old man," said Conch Republic.

"Damn right, don't do that again," British West Florida added furiously. "I'm only six and you'll give me a bloody heart-attack doing things like that."

"Ah, hello, Amérique," said France.

"It's one of those frogs!" British West Florida screamed, ducking behind Florida. "Man the battle stations!"

England and France, completely distracted from their task by the little boy's exclamation, turned and looked expectantly at America.

"My grandkids," America said. He then repeated his earlier introduction of Florida and his micronations.

"So, your children have children?" said England in disbelief. "You're a ruddy grandfather on top of everything?"

"That's how it's worked out, yes," said America. "But my kids have been pretty responsible with everything."

"Yeah, my li'l ones are a handful, sometimes," Florida said, leaning down to affectionately hug the embarrassed micronations to him. "But they are so precious and adorable."

"Jeez, Dad, lay off," said Conch Republic, her cheeks reddening.

"Not sure how Richie ended up like you, though," America said to England.

"It's 'Richard,'" British West Florida snapped. "And I am not just a micronation. I am the successor of the original West Florida. And I rightfully claim all such territory in the name of Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and demand an immediate return of the territories of Florida to the British Empire."

The little boy suddenly found himself pulled into a suffocating hug by England. America sighed in resignation, as he had fully expected England to react that way to finding someone who actually wanted to be part of his empire. Florida, himself, was looking rather irritated; after all, the parts of him which had, in fact, once belonged to England had remained loyal during the American Revolution, but Florida, as a person, had grown to deeply dislike those who had once colonized him. That meant Spain, France, and England. And there was one very specific reason as to why he disliked them.

"Lo siento, but I'm afraid we must be going," Florida said with unusual coldness, tugging his son out of England's grasp.
England, France, and, especially, Spain were not used to former colonies acting in such a manner. Most of the time, when the countries they had once conquered vented their anger for past wrongs, it manifested in the form of tirades, tantrums, punches, and childish insults and pranks. Florida, however, appeared to be attempting to suppress his anger so that his cheerful image wasn't broken.

"Wait," said Spain, who had been unusually silent for some time. "I want to know what it was I did. What did I do that made you so upset with me?"

"¿Qué?" said Florida. "You know perfectly well what it was you did, vendedor de niños."

"My Spanish isn't all that great," said England, furrowing his brows. "But did you just call Spain a 'child-seller'?"

"Tch, not like you care. All three of you sold me and many of your other territories around like we were cheap putas. How much did you get for me when you sold me to mi Papi, España? A bit of gold and some land in Texas which you immediately lost to Mexico."

The three former empires were actually astonished. They'd been accused of a lot of things by their former colonies, things like eradication of native peoples, harsh oppression, exorbitant taxes, and so on, but they'd never been called 'child-sellers' for selling those former territories to other nations. Not even Canada voiced any kind of complaint against France for his agreeing to forfeit his New France territory to England in order to protect his hold on his Caribbean islands.

"That is why you are angry with us?" said France. "Because of the selling of your lands?"

"¡Sí!" Florida shouted, his happy-go-lucky façade finally breaking. "That is why I put a law into my books specifically prohibiting people from selling off their children, because of how expendable we territories were to you pendejos!" He then whipped an aged scroll out from within his shirt and unfurled it. "It's right here between the law forbidding the caging of pregnant pigs and the law against having sex with porcupines."

"Wait a minute, Dad," said Conch Republic. "I thought it was between the law forbidding unmarried women from skydiving on Sunday and the law forbidding people from skateboarding without a license."

"No, querida, you are thinking of the law against taking a shower with no clothes on."

"I thought that was the law preventing men from wearing strapless dresses in public."

"No, no, that's between the law against farting in public after six pm and the law forbidding people from fishing while driving across a bridge."

While the father and daughter continued to argue about where certain laws were placed and a tired and embarrassed British West Florida tried to will the ground to open up and swallow him, the Europeans and America quietly backed away.

"Sorry about that, dudes," America said once they were out of earshot. "I'm sure Florida will cool off in a bit."

"Yes, we've received worse treatment," said England, trying to put the list of unimaginably strange laws he'd just heard out of his head.

"It's not like I wanted to sell any of my colonies," Spain muttered despondently to himself. "Ay, I need some time to think. And some churros."
As Spain slunk off, looking strangely melancholic, England and France turned their attention back to America. England gave a weary sigh and rested a hand on America's shoulder.

"America…Alfred," he said, catching America's attention with the seriousness of his tone and the use of his human name. "France and I have been a bit concerned about you, lately."

"What's the matter, dude? I'm perfectly fine."

"What Angleterre means," said France. "Is that…well, if there is anything you need to talk to us about, anything troubling you, you know that you can always confide in us."

"For once, I agree with France," said England. "There shouldn't be any secrets between…between family."

America blinked at them, looking completely oblivious.

"O…kay?" he said. "I have no idea where this is coming from, but thanks."

"Seriously, lad," England pressed. "If there is anything bothering you, anything at all, I want you to come and speak with us, immediately."

"All right, Iggy. If you want me to be honest, there is something on my mind."

"What is it?"

"I've been meaning to tell you all afternoon that…Your fly is down."

England's eyes widened comically and then darted down to the front of his trousers. The zipper was, in fact, down. England's face turned a brilliant shade of red and France was torn between laughing at his old rival's misfortune and pouting that America had not chosen to confide in them about the deep emotional turmoil he was surely struggling with.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: With this chapter, all the East Coast states have made appearances. I am sorry I wasn't able to make it to the Christmas chapter in time for the holidays, but I've been very busy (on the plus side, I got a boatload of chocolate, a beautiful coat and scarf, an Edward Gorey calendar, and a fancy set of watercolor paints and sketching pencils).

Florida is commonly considered by the other states to be America's loony bin. So he and America make up random phrases to greet each other with.

Me before researching Florida: I don't get why everyone think Florida is so weird. It's a perfectly normal place. With the added bonus of Disneyworld.

Me after researching Florida: …God damn it, Florida. What the hell is wrong with you?

Florida doesn't care what anyone else thinks about his clothes. He looks muy fabuloso and he knows it. The moonstone is the state gemstone of Florida. Hundreds – if not thousands – of Spanish ships went down off Florida's coast, carrying treasure troves of gold that is still being found today (hence the doubloon earring).
Thousands of Floridians go to the state line every year to throw dead fish at Alabama.

In addition to their usual wildlife, including crocodiles and alligators (Florida is the only place on earth where the two different animals coexist) and the invasive Burmese python species (which occasionally dine on crocs and gators – while the crocs and gators are still alive!), there is a special B&B in Tampa called "WildLife" that serves as a nature refuge for endangered big cats (including bobcats, lynx, jaguars, and others) and where they will actually let you cuddle with those big cats.

The "Argentinians are Italians who think they are Germans" comment is something my mother heard during her time in the state department when she was doing work in South America. Apparently, a lot of South American countries like to make jokes like that about Argentina.

As my personal headcanon, I think Florida carries around a lot of suppressed rage beneath his sunny personality. He feels a good deal of the anger and hurt from the colonial period that many of his siblings either can't remember or choose to forget.

The laws Florida mentioned are all legit Florida laws.

As a sweet bit of history not really connected with this chapter, the first recorded marriage in what is now the continental US took place in 1565 in St. Augustine, Florida between a Spanish conquistador and a black freedwoman.
Because I like micronations, that's why. Oh, and Happy New Year.

The day after Thanksgiving saw many of the states waking up early and making mad dashes to the nearest shopping centers for the Black Friday deals. Meanwhile, some of the more sensible states decided to simply sleep in and either make their holiday purchases online or to be all schmaltzy and make heartfelt, handcrafted gifts for their friends and family. Of course, that only includes those that weren't recruited against their wills by the mad shoppers.

"Please, I say, please let me die," Alabama groaned as he lay curled up in the shopping cart being pushed by his little sister Nevada while she and California chatted loudly. His Iron Bowl fever was still going pretty strong.

"Like, quit harshing our buzz, 'Bama," said California. 

"Lordy, I could have been stuck with anyone, I say, anyone, but it had to be you."

"I thought you Southern guys were, like, meant to be gentlemen and shit. You should, like, offer to help us carry stuff like we volunteered you to do."

"I could be back in bed, sleepin' like a cat on a laptop keyboard. Why can't you just, I say, why can't you just get Damián to help you? This is the type of thing that nephews are for."

"I haven't seen my little boy in a while," Nevada said thoughtfully. "Cali, did you see my little boy at the party, yesterday?"

"No, I didn't," said California. "Like, total bummer, he's so adorable."


"What did you say about my niño?" Nevada said with a sharp frown.

"Shuttin' up."

"I do wish my Damián would spend more time with me, though." Nevada gave a forlorn sigh and glanced further up the store where she saw Florida and his children. British West Florida was curled up sulking in the shopping cart the same way Alabama was doing while Florida cheerfully raced the cart up and down the aisles with a giggling Conch Republic hanging onto his back.

"It's okay, sis," California said, resting a hand on her shoulder. "You know what'll, like, cheer you up? Going on a, like, totally badass spending spree." She flipped out a Mastercard Gold Card and smirked. "Who's with me?"

"Fucking shit fuck," said a high-pitched voice beside them.

"You're so right, Señor Tony," said Nevada. She grinned widely at the little, grey extraterrestrial,
completely ignoring the stares from the other shoppers, who seemed to be trying to pretend that they weren't seeing anything.

"Shit, bitch."

"Ay, definitely, we were out of peanut butter, anyway."

As the motley crew made their way through the store, occasionally having to dodge, jump, or beat back mobs of rabid Black Friday shoppers, they walked away with arms laden with copious purchases. Nevada had been particularly skilled at discouraging competition when she drove her silver stiletto heels into her opponents' vulnerable places with very precise and very painful kicks. Nevada also had to talk Mr. Tony out of using a disintegration ray on some of the more aggressive assholes in the store, as it was rather poor form to kill someone just for being unpleasant. In order to compensate Alabama for having to serve as a meat-shield in several instances and to cheer him up due to another of his "Roll Tide-War Eagle" fits, California bought him an ice cream cone. Of course, this did little to assuage his irritation at having to witness at least half a dozen guys make flirtatious gestures towards Nevada, who took the attention in stride.

"Ain't you got, I say, ain't you got any shame at all, girl?" Alabama said waspishly.

"Well, what can I say?" Nevada replied proudly. "I'm quite a catch. And a very gifted bowler, too," she added randomly.

Alabama rested a hand against his face and muttered to himself, though his muttering soon turned into a steady beat of: "Roll Tide, War Eagle, Roll Tide, War Eagle…"

"Where is Papi, anyway?" said Nevada. "He's normally the first one to the mall on Black Friday."

It was true. America was often very obsessive about Black Friday deals. Half the time, though, he just did it for the thrill of the competition rather than because he actually wanted something. Of course, he didn't let himself get too carried away by the frenzy and often found himself stopping to help fellow shoppers being victimized by the crazier people in the stores. The states had lost count of how many people their father saved from being trampled by Black Friday mobs over the years.

"Oh, he had to go to one of those, like, totally boring meetings or some shit," said California.

"Yes," Alabama added. "And some fool went and booked their meetin's in the same place – the same place, I say – as where our aunts and uncles have been havin' their meetin's. Frankly, I'm surprised so many people have walked away with all their parts attached."

"I bet it was still funny," said Nevada.

"Ari told me it was."

"Wait, Arizona told you and not me?"

"Why would she, I say, why would she tell you anythin'?"

Nevada pouted and poked him on the forehead.

Nevada was many things.

A drinker. A gambler. A thrill junkie. Somewhat loose in regards to her chastity. Quite skilled at stabbing people who tried to cheat her. And a bit of a pyromaniac.
But she was also a mother. And a very affectionate and doting one, too. This was, perhaps, one of her very few good qualities. Well, that and her ample... tracks of land. Being a caring mother was probably the result of having such a caring father of her own. She smiled to herself as she remembered how her father carried her around on his shoulders when she was a girl, and how he would sing her lullabies when she couldn't sleep or had nightmares, and how he didn't mind switching back and forth between English and Spanish when he was teaching her to read because he knew she had trouble using only one at a time back in those early days.

She'd had a similarly affectionate relationship with her own child. Her little boy was always so sweet and gentle. She still remembered the day he discovered his love of plants when they went on their first mother-son hiking trip to Mount Charleston. His face had just lit up in awe at the sheer amount of green around them. Every year since then, they took a week or two to go to one of her parks (after all, despite what her siblings liked to think, Nevada wasn't just a barren desert and the Las Vegas Strip). Unfortunately, her baby boy hadn't been spending much time with her, lately. Papi had told her he was making some new friends and wanted to hang out with them; which was wonderful, as her son was normally so timid, but it left Nevada feeling a little left out.

At least she could always count on her Papi to lift her mood and give her some good advice, which was why she found herself walking into the conference center where his meeting was being held, bringing a couple bags of tacos with her as any responsible daughter should in such circumstances. Plus, it was an excellent opportunity to maybe get an advance on her allowance, if she played her cards right (which she always did; the house always wins for a reason, after all).

She got past security with as much difficulty as any of her siblings had. Meaning all she had to do was walk in through the doors and the security personnel barely gave her a passing glance.

As she made her way up to the conference room, she noticed a group of children and young teens going into another room. She smiled as she realized it must be a meeting of micronations, as they were clearly nations but not big or powerful enough to be part of the world conference. Such cute little niños they were. Maybe, someday, they would officially have the recognition they wanted so badly.

She was about to turn and continue on her way when something caught her eye. Or, rather, someone caught her eye.

"All right," Sealand began in his chipper tone. "The meeting for the League of Micronations is ready to begin."

Molossia just rolled his eyes. Why did he bother showing up? Bunch of whiny children was what the rest of the group was. To make matters worse, some of his cousins had been talking about going with him to micronation meetings after meeting Sealand and the others during the party (stupid Talossa kept whining about why he never introduced them before and invited her to come with him). Why did he ever think leaving his garden to try and make some friends was a good idea? Oh, God, he really hoped they didn't think he was weird. He wasn't weird, right? He just needed to do something to get everyone's attention. Being the center of attention is what makes you cool. Well, that's what Mamá always said...

"Mi corazón!"

Oh, fuck no! Why? Molossia thought fearfully before he was yanked unceremoniously from his seat.

"My li'l nene," Nevada squealed with delight as she pulled Molossia flush against her rather ample chest.
Ordinarily, a hot woman holding him in such a manner would have been quite a welcome thought to
the irritable micronation (or even an attractive man, because, seriously, he shouldn't be forced to
choose one team or the other, right?). But not when it was his own goddamned mother!

"Why haven't you visited your mamá in ages, Damián?!" Nevada continued, oblivious to her son's
growing annoyance. "I didn't even see you at the party, yesterday! Have you been avoiding me?"

Molossia managed to turn his head just enough to see the reactions from his fellow micronations and
immediately regretted it. They were all staring, open-mouthed, at the sight in front of them.
Obviously, not one of them had been prepared for such a spectacle. Molossia also really did not
appreciate the lecherous look that had developed in Seborga's eyes as he took in the appearance of
Molossia's much-too-attractive mother. Because, as embarrassing as it was, Molossia's mother was a
looker. She was all long legs and soft, brown skin, with jet black hair that had been cropped short,
and her eyes the same bright blue as America's. Molossia just wished his mother had had the sense to
cover herself in something more than short-shorts and a tank top (after all, it was seventy-seven
degrees; was she trying to catch her death of cold? She should be wearing a freaking parka, right
now!). Molossia knew he would never live this down.

"Mijito, what's the matter?" Nevada said when she realized that Molossia wasn't returning her hug.
"Are you not happy to see your mamacita?"

"N-Ne, Patrino," Molossia stammered in nervous Esperanto. "Kompreneble mi estas feliĉa vidi vin."

"Then why aren't you hugging me back, Damián?"

Face flushed with humiliation, Molossia grudgingly returned the show of familial love, prompting
Nevada's smile to return to nuclear level brightness.

"Aw, chiquito, it's so good to see you," she cooed.

Molossia looked back at the other micronations with a venomous gaze that was detectable even
through his dark sunglasses, silently daring any of them to say anything. Finally, Nevada seemed to
have reached her hug time duration requirement and let the furiously blushing Molossia go.

"Hola, mi bomboncitos," Nevada said, smiling widely at the other micronations. "I am Miss Nevada,
Molossia's mother."

"Why are you intruding on this very exclusive meeting?" Ladonia said, puffing up indignantly. "We
have some very big, important business to discuss and only we micronations are allowed."

"Aw, aren't you just precioso," Nevada said, pinching Ladonia's cheek, making him sputter in
outrage.

"How dare you! I am the great Ladonia! I defeated Sweden, himself, in mortal combat!"

A couple of the other micronations exchanged looks with each other as they had learned that Sweden
had only been pretending to let Ladonia beat him in scripted fights whenever the micronation was
upset about something. The rest of the micronations just snickered at Ladonia's predicament while
Molossia still stood by blushing in mortification at his mother's actions.

Nevada just ruffled Ladonia's hair and turned back to her son, who looked for all the world as
though he just wanted to disappear into the ground beneath him.

"Well, have fun with your meeting, corazóncito," she said. "I just came by to bring Papá America
some lunch. You know how your abuelo likes to eat. Good thing I brought some extra." She handed
him one of the taco bags. "Now my nene won't have to go hungry, either. Be sure to come see me and your Tía California after you're done here, Bueno?"

"Jes, Patrino," Molossia said resignedly.

Nevada then pressed a kiss to his forehead before strutting out of the room, the click of her high-heeled shoes getting fainter and fainter as she made her way to the main conference room to complete her initial mission.

Molossia slunk back to his chair and sank into it with an ominous thud. He looked as if he might strangle the first person to speak. Unfortunately, Seborga was about as talented at reading the atmosphere as Veneziano and, again, like Northern Italy, just had to open his mouth at the absolute worst time.

"Well, mio amico, you never told us you had a mother that attractive. Can you give me her number?"

As Nevada gave her father a familial kiss to the cheek, having delivered the rest of the tacos to him (and successfully getting an allowance advance), and turned to leave, the conference room was shaken by the sound of terrified, Italian screaming. A quick look around the room showed that both the Italy brothers were present, so it couldn't have been them freaking out.

The sound of glass breaking and an ominous crash from below drew everyone to the window. Face-down in the concrete, having clearly been thrown from a fairly high window in the building, was the barely-recognizable form of Seborga. In fact, the only way anyone could tell who had crashed into the pavement was due to the trademark Italian hair-curl.

"Ve~!" Italy called out, worried for the Italian micronation. "Seborga, are you okay?!"

Seborga somehow found the strength to roll over onto his back.

"Miss Nevada!" he called out, seeing her up at the window beside her father. "Would you go out with me sometime?!"

"Bastard is fine," Romano grumbled.

He wouldn't be for much longer, though, as Molossia had clearly heard that statement and decided to launch himself out of the window that he'd thrown Seborga from in order to send a punch to him at high velocity. The nations watched in awe as the Nevadan micronation pummeled his sort-of-friend mercilessly.

"Uh, can we go to lunch break now?" said America. "Not to rush you guys, but I've got tacos waiting."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry, Seborga, but Nevada has a boyfriend. A boyfriend who, despite looking harmless, will murder you in your sleep if you touch Nevada.

We all know about Nevada, right? Or, at least, everyone thinks they know about Nevada. Gambling, quickie marriages, easy divorces, prostitution, organized crime, loose alcohol laws. In a weird twist, though, did you know that prostitution is only legal
in certain parts of Nevada (only in counties with populations under 400,000) and illegal in other places including Clark County (where Las Vegas is located) and Washoe County (where Reno is) and much of the craziness is actually from tourists, and the average Nevadan is actually pretty chill (except on the road, where they become speed-demons). Also, Reno has the National Bowling Stadium.

Back in the early 20th century, Progressivists imagined transforming Nevada into an epicenter of universities and social reform as part of an effort to curb capitalism. Nevada is also the site of a number of nuclear experiments and UFO sightings (as well as Area 51).

Molossia is speaking Esperanto (his national language next to English). He's supposed to be saying "No, Mother. Of course I am happy to see you." I don't trust Google Translate to get it right, though. So, please, correct me if I'm wrong. Then again, who actually speaks Esperanto? Not even the state department uses it, anymore.

I think Nevada likes to use a lot of Spanish terms of endearment when speaking to her son. She uses pretty standard ones like "mijo/mijito" (my son/my little son; adding 'ito/ita' makes something a diminuitive), "nene" (baby boy), and "mi corazón" (my heart), but she also uses terms like "bomboncito" (little candy) when she feels like being cutesy.

Before anyone calls me out on it, I know 77 degrees isn't cold. It's just that Nevada and Molossia are used to intense heat (Nevada goes into the hundreds in the summer), so 77 degrees is kind of cold to them. I checked the temperatures for Friday after Thanksgiving in Houston, Texas just to be a little extra accurate.

Molossia is Nevada's little baby boy and she can embarrass him in public as much as she pleases. I suppose this also leaves open the question of who Molossia's father would be…*looks at an innocently smiling Macau*

(Oh, and I thought of a cute idea for another pairing between a state and a foreign region. What do you all think of Alabama and Monaco? The Talladega gentleman and the Grand Prix princess. #sophisticatedracingenthusiasts).
"TOUCHDOWN!"

The word echoed through Texas's house as dozens of televisions following dozens of different football games captured various victories for all the United States to see. For some states, like Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Arizona, who were suffering from illnesses caused by in-state rivalries, the end of the day brought a welcome relief to the pain they had been experiencing. For others, however, the results were not as welcome.

CRASH!

"How could they lose?!" Michigan screamed as he stomped on the remains of the television. Texas would surely make him pay for another, but he didn't care about that at the moment. "Thirty-nine tuh sixty-two! God damn it!"

Ohio just watched Michigan raging as he sat smugly on the sofa. Yes, today was definitely a good day to be a Buckeye. What else can you expect when you have the most awesome football players ever in your state? Not that he'd say that out loud, as Pennsylvania might hear him and get all huffy because she had some bragging rights of her own. Poor Maryland was still sobbing her eyes out over the results of the Maryland-Penn State match. Three points to thirty-eight is kind of humiliating, after all. Or even how the Temple Owls stomped the Connecticut Huskies in a seven to fifty-seven match. When Pennsylvania played, she played hard, as Ohio knew from personal experience.

Suddenly, Michigan stopped his little tantrum and stood very still. Then, he slowly turned and looked at Ohio with a cold smile. Ohio knew that look. The last time he saw it, he found Michigan's stupid pet wolverine ripping up his personal magazines. Thankfully, it was just his magazines. If that thing had touched his comic books, he would have skinned it and made it into a nice hat. Regardless, Ohio did not like the devious expression Michigan was wearing. Knowing his little brother, he was going to do something vicious and underhanded.

"Don't even think about it, Mitch," Ohio said warningly.

"What d'yu mean?" said Michigan with an innocent smile that wasn't fooling Ohio.

"You're up to something."

"Oh, now, Godfrey. Even if I was up tuh somethin', do yuh really think I'd tell yuh aboot it?"

Michigan shuffled out of the room, followed by Ohio's suspicious gaze all the while. Once outside the room, he ambled through the house and out to the cavernous garage where he found Indiana fixing up a red and white, open-wheel formula racing car. Alabama was sitting on a nearby workbench with an icepack pressed to his forehead.

"What, yuh working on a car withoot me?" Michigan said lightly.
"I'm gonna tell you this once," Indiana said evenly. "Get the hell oot, Mitch."

"Aw, c'mon, Hoosie. Don't be like that. What'cha workin' on, anyhoo?"

"She's helpin' me fix my Betsy, that's what," said Alabama. "I need my gal in workin' order. Functionin', that is."

"I didn't know yuh drove formula-style, Owen."

"I don't, usually. You know I'm the center of the NASCAR universe."

"I think Virginia wouold argue with yuh on that," said Indiana as she inspected the engine. "North Carolina and Florida, too."

"My Talladega Superspeedway is the longest NASCAR track in the country! Longest, I say! Besides, I've got the International Hall of Motorsports Fame right next door to it, so I've got a reputation to maintain, ya hear?"

"All right, all right, just let me do muh job, already." Indiana went back to her tinkering, grumbling about how NASCAR wasn't real racing, not like her beloved Indy 500 (which was part of the famous Triple Crown of Motorsport; not that Indiana would ever boast about it, or anything).

"So, Hoosie," Michigan continued, ignoring the irritated tic in his older sister's jaw. "Yuh want tuh go over the Christmas plans or anythin'? 'Cause I've got some great ideas for a holiday lightshow."

That certainly caught Indiana's attention. As much as she disliked Michigan, though not nearly as much as she loathed Kentucky and Illinois, she couldn't deny that she greatly enjoyed setting up for Christmas with him.

"It just so happens that I got a shipment of new, top'the line decorations which I'm willin' to share," Michigan said slyly.

"Wait, I say, wait right there," said Alabama. "Indy, he's up to somethin'. Schemin', that is. Ask him what he wants in return."

Indiana pursed her lips and looked up at Michigan with obvious suspicion.

"He's got a point, Mitch," she said. "What's the catch?"

"Ope!" said Michigan with an innocent smile. "Did I fuhrget tuh mention that we need to stop by Ohio's place on the way to my house?"

"He's a-plottin' somethin'," said Alabama. "Don't let him, I say, don't let him trick ya, sis."

Indiana scratched her chin thoughtfully.

"How much're yuh willing tuh make it worth m'while?" she said.

Michigan pulled out a phone and opened the camera roll. He pulled up recent pictures of the decorations and specialty lights he'd just had made. He'd been planning to share them with her, anyway, but it wasn't like she needed to know that when he required her help with his plans. Considering the hungry look in her eyes and the faint twitch around her lips that might be taken as a smile, he'd made a good call.

"All right, we got a deal, Mitch," said Indiana.
She handed him his cellphone back and Michigan clapped his hands together.

"Wonderful!" he said. "Let's talk terms." He slung an arm around Indiana's shoulder and steered her towards the door while Alabama looked at them in righteous indignation.

Alabama, honestly, didn't rightly care what they did to Ohio (Northerners messing with other Northerners was always amusing), but his Betsy was still having problems and he didn't feel comfortable working on his own cars. A doctor doesn't operate on his or her own family members, after all. Also, with the aftereffects from his fever, he didn't entirely trust his own judgement, at the moment.

"But, I suppose, when needs must, and all that," he muttered to himself, picking up a wrench.

America was slouched on the conference table, bored out of his gourd and ravenously hungry. He'd run a bit late that morning as the football jitters had kept him up most of Friday night and the aftermath had kept him up late on Saturday, so he hadn't been able to get more than a slice of toast as he rushed out the door on Sunday morning. The meeting had been dragging on for ages and they hadn't even had a snack break, yet.

He was distracted from his discomfort when he felt his cellphone vibrating. Quietly pulling out the phone and looking at his messages, America noticed a new text.

Jeet?
-Mitchell

Alfred texted a quick 'No' in response.

Be there in 5
-Mitchell

America watched the clock anxiously after that reply. Fingers tapping expectantly on the table as he zoned out from whatever was being said by the current speaker. Sure enough, five minutes on the dot, there was a crash as the doors were flung open and a figure on skis practically flew into the room.

The figure was a blur of green and blue, as the newcomer skidded to a stop beside America. The person, now shown to be a teenage boy, was clearly another of America's wayward brood, if the mega-watt smile was any indication. The boy removed his ski-goggles and shook his rather messy, brown hair loose from under the woolen hat he was wearing (the hat was a rather traditional winter hat, done in pale, bluish-green with white snowflakes). His clear blue eyes were bright and sparkling, and he had a sweet, round face that made several of the female nations just want to pinch his cheeks because he was just so cute.

"Hey, Michigan," said America.

"Heya, Papa," said the boy. The boy raised a mitten-clad hand and practically shoved it in America's face. "Greetin's from the Big Mitten."

America laughed and pulled Michigan into a warm hug and lightly ruffled the boy's hat-covered hair. When he saw the expectant looks from the other nations, America slung an arm around his son's shoulders and smiled.
"Guys, this is Mitchell Jones," he explained. "The state of Michigan."

"And home of America's car industry, don'tcha know," Michigan explained brightly. "Anyhoo, Papa, I brought'cha snack." He hoisted off a backpack that had a blue lion emblazoned on it and fished out a metal tin that was very prettily decorated in Christmas colors and handed it to America. "Mackinac fudge, best in the world. I also brought'cha thermos of hot choc'late." He handed the thermos to America. It should also be established that Michigan pronounced the name "Mackinae" as "Mack-in-aw," just so there is no confusion for those who are not familiar with the correct pronunciation of the name.

"Thanks, my little Santa Claus," said America.

Michigan positively beamed.

"I'm glad tuh make yuh happy, Papa," he said. "Yur the best papa in the world."

Several of the female countries (and one or two of the more sensitive male countries) made "Aw" sounds as Michigan gave America another hug, practically burrowing his face into his father's jacket.

"Ope! Papa, 'fore I forget," said Michigan, drawing back, "I'm workin' on the fam'ly Christmas list." He pulled a roll of paper out and opened it, causing it to unfurl all the way to the floor and then continue unrolling out through the doorway and into the hall. "Christmas is just 'round the corner, don'tcha know. But I'm not sure what to get for North Dakota. Yuh know how hard it is tuh figure out what he wants."

"Just get him some decent beer and a new hunting knife, I'm sure he'll be happy," said America.

"America, you actually allow your children to drink?!!" England exclaimed in shock.

"You want to try telling them not to? Because you're more than welcome to try and I wish you the best of luck."

"They'd all probably kill yuh if yuh did," Michigan added with a casual shrug. "Well, 'cept Utah. Goodness knows he doesn't touch the stuff. But if yuh tried tuh keep ND from his booze, there wouldn't be a body left tuh find, yuh know. I, muhself, prefer a nice craft brew, not like that cheap, generic swill that some members of muh fam'ly like."

America just shook his head as he knew exactly who Michigan was referring to. No matter how hard he tried, Michigan and Ohio absolutely refused to cooperate unless there were lives at stake. It was the same story with many of the state rivalries, though Michigan and Ohio's enmity seemed to only be rivaled in magnitude by the one between New York and Massachusetts. After all, it wasn't like every state declares an actual war on another to get ownership rights over a city.

"Well, if yuh need anythin' else, Papa, just give me a call. I'm not lazy like Ohio."

Suddenly, the "Mr. Grinch" song began playing and Michigan, still smiling, casually flipped on his cellphone and clicked on the speaker.

"ASSHOLE!" the person on the other end screeched. "I know you're talking shit about me!"

"Oh-heya, Ohio," Michigan said pleasantly. "How's muh favorite big brother?"

"FUCK YOU!"

"Tsk-tsk, yuh should really learn tuh deal with that temper a-yurs. Don't wanna get coal for
Christmas, do yuh?"

"Go to hell, Michel."

Michigan rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Bro, for the final time," he said, still perfectly polite in his tone. "It's Mitchell, now. Or do yuh want me tuh start callin' yuh 'Gottfried' instead of 'Godfrey'? Not that either name would make yuh less of a Fuckeye."

"BITCH-IGAN!"

"Ohio," America said waringly, "be nice to your little brother."

"HE STARTED IT!"

"How did he start it?"

"HE WAS BORN!"

Michigan gave a teary-eyed pout that had practically everyone melting from how cute it was. In fact, everyone seemed to have forgotten that Michigan had insulted Ohio, too. Such was the power of someone blessed with a deceptively angelic face and the ability to conceal blind, terrifying rage.

"Why does muh big brother hate me so?" Michigan said with a sniffle. Handing the phone off to his father, who patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

Belgium was so overcome that she rushed to Michigan's side and practically smothered him in a comforting hug. Unseen by Belgium, a wickedly delighted smile split Michigan's face.

*Score one for me, Fuckeye,* Michigan thought to himself.

"Ohio, that was uncalled-for," said America sternly. "You apologize to Michigan."

"LIKE HELL I WILL!" was Ohio's reply.

"Godfrey Jones!"

"NO!"

Ohio hung up.

"He's always been such a bully," said Michigan sorrowfully. "Even 'fore I was born, he wanted everythin' that was mine. Even declared war on me."

"You poor thing," Belgium cooed. "You come with me and I'll make you some waffles."

Michigan wiped away a crocodile tear and smiled at her.

"Thank yuh," he said. "Yuh're a nice lady."

As the two left, Michigan was internally crowing in triumph as he'd established his alibi. All he had to do was sit back and wait for Ohio to discover the early Christmas gift which he had sent Indiana to deliver. Plus, he got waffles out of the deal, too.

Ohio was still fuming as he drove away from the airport. Stupid Michigan just couldn't understand or
accept that he'd been beaten by Ohio's far superior team and always would be, from now on. What right did Michigan have to trash-talk him just for being better at something? Spoiled brat. And Dad was always taking his side just because his 'precious baby Michigan' was 'ever so important' to supporting the economy with all his factories and because 'wonderful little Michigan' was 'so very instrumental in winning the Second World War.'

Ohio was important, too! Not that anyone seemed to remember him for much besides his three Cs (Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbia) and his many astronauts and presidents. But he had contributed just as much as Michigan to the American legacy, if not more. He had the first ambulance service, the first traffic light, the first cash register, the first professional baseball team (those good ol' Cincinnati Reds), he was home to the rubber capital of the world in Akron, he was the birthplace of Steven Spielberg, for goodness' sake!

But, of course, everyone just loves sweet, little Michigan because he makes America's cars (never mind that Ohio manufactured cars, too). To top everything off, Michigan had recently gotten a huge boost in strength because his internal economy was getting back on track after years of stagnation and decline, plus his unemployment rates were the lowest they'd ever been. It might be a bit petty and spiteful, but there was a very deliberate reason why Ohio chose to drive a Honda Accord rather than a car from an American company.

He pulled into the driveway of his home in suburban Dayton at long last. It was a very nice house, done in a Tudor-revival style. Unfortunately, his relief at being back home was immediately soured when he saw the 'light display' which someone had put up on his property.

In front of his house was a luminous Ohio State emblem done in red and white lights. That wasn't what he took issue with, however. No, the problem lay in the fact that, up on the roof, there was a Santa Claus figure with a string of yellow lights coming down from it, positioned in such a way that it looked as though the Santa Claus was taking a whizz on the Ohio State emblem. To complete the rather offensive display, there was a dummy dressed in an Ohio State-themed hoodie dangling from the rafters of the house with a string of blue and yellow lights wrapped around the dummy's neck like a noose.

Ohio stared at the display for a full minute before he finally absorbed what he was looking at.

"MICHIGAAAAAN!" he screamed furiously to the heavens.

Later, after he spent a good hour ripping down the lights, Ohio was curled up on his sofa with a scowl practically grafted onto his face as he attempted to ease his pain with a box of Buckeye candies. Beside him on the floor was a cast-iron skillet which he had every intention of using to bash Michigan in the head if he set so much as a single pinkie toe on Ohio's property. He could already picture the smug, self-satisfied look that was more than likely on that little bastard's face, right at that moment.

"I really do fucking hate him," Ohio muttered.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Michigan and Indiana really strike me as Christmas states. Especially considering there are towns like Christmas, Michigan and Santa Claus, Indiana. Add in North Pole, Alaska and you've got a Christmas Trio.
I've said it before and I'll say it again. I do not follow organized sports, so I had to look up any and all football scores and references to car racing that were mentioned.

From what I can tell about regional Midwestern accents, like in large parts of Michigan and Indiana, there is a strong similarity to the stereotypical Canadian accent. A lot of drawn out 'ooh' sounds, like saying "aboot" instead of "about." Please correct any inaccuracies, but I am relying on what my father has told me about Midwestern dialects (he went to college in Indiana; DePauw University in Greencastle, if anyone cares to know).

"Ope!" is a Michigan/Midwestern slang term that basically just means "oops." Also, I've read that a lot of Michiganders like to mash up words in their sentences, an example of this is "Jeet?" which means "Did you eat?"

"Hoosie" is a shortening of "Hoosier," which is what people from Indiana call themselves.

Michigan has the highest population of Finns, Dutch, and Macedonians in the US. It also has the second-highest population of Belgians, only being beaten for number one by Wisconsin.

Michigan is home to America's three big car producers: Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler.

Michigan and Ohio fought a war over who owned the city of Toledo. Granted, it was before Michigan became a state, but that enmity still lives.

Mackinac (as I said, pronounced as "Mack-in-aw") is an idyllic little island on Lake Huron with lots of adorable shops, historic buildings, and stuff. Cars are also strictly forbidden on the island.

Ohio can sense when Michigan trash-talks him. Michigan just doesn't care what Ohio thinks of him. As much as they hate each other, though, Ohio and Michigan are still brothers; anyone who hurts Ohio will face Michigan's Finnish sniper wrath and anyone who lays a hand on Michigan will be sent on a one-way trip to the bottom of Lake Erie by a very protective Ohio.

Michigan's original human name was "Michel," which he changed to "Mitchell" after the Civil War because it reminded him too much of his mother. Ohio's name also used to be "Gottfried," but he changed it during WWI because of the rising anti-German sentiments in the country (seriously, people changed street names if they sounded "too German" and numerous families would go so far as to change their own surnames).
Now that I've eased the mood with a couple of mindless antics, it's time to get back to the more serious drama.

North Dakota just nodded mutely as he listened to South Dakota drone on, and on about how wonderful Thanksgiving was that year before suddenly shifting gears and digressing onto a completely unrelated topic. They were in the process of driving a couple of their aunts and uncles to the airport before hitting the road, themselves. North Dakota didn't really want to go home, just yet, so he'd convinced South Dakota that they should take a trip or something to break up the tedium after they got the relatives to the airport. Also, things were pretty open for him, at the moment, as North Dakota had gotten all his paperwork done about a month or more in advance, as usual. What he really wanted was something to break up the monotony.

You see, North Dakota, for all his 'quiet guy in the back of the bar who can rip your spine out if you mess with him' demeanor, was actually rather like his father in the sense that the two of them thrived on adventure. If things got too quiet or dull, North Dakota had a tendency to get a little…moody.

"So I says to North, I says," said South Dakota. "'North, put down that rattler. It's dangerous.' And you know what North does? I tell you what North does. He holds it by its neck – or, well, I don't suppose snake's really *have* necks, do they? I mean, they're just one long *thing* – but he grips it just under its head so it can't twist 'round and bite him, 'cause that would be really stupid, wouldn't it, North? Holding a snake in a place where it can twist 'round and bite you would be really stupid, right?

"Anyway, so North's got the rattler and it's really, really ticked off. I mean, really, really, really ticked off. But North's just standing there, calm as you like, and puts this tiny top hat on the rattler's head and tells me to get a picture. Can you believe it? Apparently, North had been looking at a lot of pictures online of snakes in tiny hats and he wanted to do one of his own. I mean, honestly, going to all that trouble and scaring the living daylights outta me just to get a picture of a rattler in a top hat."

South Dakota continued to ramble as North Dakota steered the vehicle into a parking spot and got out to begin unloading the luggage.

"Oh, North, let me help you, North," South exclaimed, hastily clambering out of the car. As he stepped out, however, he gave a hiss of pain as he put pressure on his left leg.

As he stumbled, a strong hand caught South Dakota by the shoulder and he looked up to see the solemn face of his uncle Lakota.

"Another bad day?" Lakota asked him.

"It's nothing, Uncle," South Dakota said, forcing a smile. "Just need my cane, today. That's all."

Lakota's expression didn't change. He had seen the injury his nephew carried, an abscess in his left
leg. South Dakota had had the abscess since 1890, when he and North Dakota were two years old. Some days, Lakota couldn't help but blame the boys' father for not keeping a more careful watch on his troops at the time. It was their recklessness and willful disregard for life that led to South Dakota being permanently injured as he was. No matter what else Lakota thought of his little brother America's family, no child should have to go through that kind of pain. A pain which Lakota, himself, shared, as he had the same wound as his nephew.

The others barely noticed the exchange, except for North Dakota – who looked silently at his twin with the faint flicker of concern in his eyes – and Nakota – who took it upon herself to fuss over South Dakota and make sure he didn't aggravate his leg too much.

Once the group gathered their belongings, they made their way into the airport terminal to await their flight.

At the same time, America was saying his goodbyes to his fellow nations at the airport. He didn't want to sound paranoid, but America was reasonably certain that England and France were in on something. Every other conversation he had with them, it felt like they were fishing for information...and he had a vague suspicion of what exactly they were after. Well, if they wanted to know the location of his super-duper, top-secret, borderline-mad scientist laboratory where he was working on his superhero gadgets, then they had another thing coming. He was far too smart to fall for their tricks.

He was currently seeing the Nordics off. Of course, he had noticed that they had been paying closer attention to him, recently, too. Not that America minded; he liked making friends and he'd always thought the Nordics were pretty cool. Especially since he and Canada made a little discovery a few decades earlier.

America was just finishing up talking with Denmark about their upcoming Awesome Trio meeting with Prussia when he caught sight of two of his sons walking with a couple of their aunts and uncles. He recognized Nakota's kindly, round face and the red paint she usually wore across her forehead, Eastern Dakota (also known as "Santee") and Western Dakota (also known as "Yankton-Yanktonai") looking nearly identical save for the fact that Western Dakota was a woman and Eastern Dakota was a man, and, of course, Lakota's halting gait as he walked with a cane the same way America's son, South Dakota, did.

"Hey, guys!" America called out, waving over at his family.

The other group saw him and hesitantly made their way over, most of them not entirely certain about the people he had with him. South Dakota was the only one of them particularly eager to meet America's friends, as North Dakota wasn't especially talkative and the tribes were very cautious in interacting with the Europeans.

America, not sensing the atmosphere, simply decided to go ahead and introduce everyone. The Nordics and the tribes greeted each other politely, if a little formally. But the main focus of the Nordics' attention was on America's sons.

Physically, North Dakota and South Dakota were exceptionally alike. They had the same chin-length, pale blonde hair, sharp features, and violet-blue eyes – though South Dakota's hair had four, distinct locks of hair that curled up on one side while North's was just straight. South Dakota was also relying on a cane to walk. In terms of personality and temperament, it was clear that the twins were as different from each other as Norway and Denmark – which suddenly put in perspective for
the Nordics a comment which America had made months ago when he had arranged a ride to the airport for them at the end of the New York conference, in which he had mentioned that Norway and Denmark reminded him of two of his kids.

"It's so nice to meet you all," South Dakota said cheerily. "North and I just about died from excitement when Dad told us that we'd get the chance to meet his friends. Didn't we, North?"

North Dakota just blinked dispassionately in response.

"That's absolutely right, North! Oh, a proper introduction is needed, I suppose. I'm South Dakota, better known to my family and friends as 'Deidrick Jones.' And this is my twin brother, North Dakota, also known as 'Derick Jones.'"

"Wait a moment," Norway suddenly spoke up. "I have seen you both, before."

"Oh, you must be Mr. Norway! Yes, North and I were part of the group sent to assist in the sabotage operations you were running in World War Two. It's because we work so well together, don't we, North? You're the strong, silent one and I'm the unassuming, friendly one, so no one would ever suspect us. Plus, we're really good with cold weather, aren't we, North? What was it that California called you once, North? She said you were like The North in Westeros. You remember, North, that's from that violent fantasy series where everyone dies and there are ice zombies. Didn't Cali also refer to you as 'Hoth,' once? You know, the ice planet from Star Wars."

"You stabbed eighty-three enemy soldiers on your first day," Norway said in quiet disbelief.

"Hmm? Really? I was certain it was more."

"You both spent five days in a blizzard with no food and still managed to blow up a hydroelectric plant."

"Oh, yeah, North had a lot of fun doing that. He's not big on industrial complexes, are you, North? No, my brother's more of a 'back to nature' type. You get to appreciate the simpler things when you're a Rough Rider, after all."

"What's a 'Rough Rider'?” said Finland, who was the only one not even remotely startled by the Dakotas' exploits. Perhaps it was because Finland was, himself, insanely dangerous but talented at hiding it behind his adorable face.

"The Rough Riders were the First United States Volunteer Cavalry. One member of the group was the future president, Theodore Roosevelt, who credited his skills as an outdoorsman and even his eventual rise to the presidency to the experiences he had at North's place. Teddy Roosevelt is North's favorite president, too. Isn't that right, North?"

North Dakota still said nothing, though there was the faintest hint of color in his cheeks.

"Anyway," South Dakota continued. "So you guys are Vikings, right? Like, axes and horned helmets and beards? Where are your beards, though? Did you ever sail on longships? Is it true that you were the first Europeans to find Dad when he was a baby? Minnesota says, and our cousin Manitoba agrees, that--"

"For goodness' sake, boy," Lakota said tiredly. "Would you take a breath? You keep talking so fast, you'll pass out."

"Oh, sorry, Uncle Lakota, I get excited." He turned back to the Nordics with an apologetic smile. "Sorry about the question barrage. I just like talking. I could go on forever."
"It's all right, kid," Denmark said, giving a wide grin of his own. "I love talking, too. Especially about myself."

Norway and Iceland both rolled their eyes. All they wanted was to get on their flight, which, unfortunately, wasn't leaving for a while yet.

Denmark then went into an explanation about the Vikings (making sure to emphasize that, no, Vikings did not have horns on their helmets). Of course, mentioning the Nordics' Viking past also involved bringing up Scandia, their father-figure. Iceland began to look very nervous and he could sense someone was watching him; glancing up, he saw America's brother, Lakota, observing his reactions to Denmark's description of Scandia.

"Yes, well, we must get going," Iceland interrupted, tugging rather forcefully on Denmark's arm. "Got a plane to get to."

"We must take our leave, as well," Lakota added in an even tone, though his suspicious gaze continued to linger on Iceland. While he might not have lived in the Northeast, Lakota had heard stories from some of his siblings, like his brother Mi'kmaq, about the events surrounding the birth of their little brothers, America and Canada. "It was…nice to meet you all." He turned to North Dakota. "We will see you later, nephew. Make sure your brother doesn't hurt himself."

North Dakota just nodded in response.

"Come on, we need to go," Iceland said, more firmly.

"Hej, Icey, what's your hurry?" said Denmark.

"Yes, Iceland, our flight doesn't leave for another hour or so," said Finland.

"I…just…don't you guys want to take some time to plan for the expedition?" said Iceland.

"Whoa, cool," said America. "You guys having an adventure or something?"

"If you must know," said Norway. "We are planning to find someone in Sápmi. It's the northern region we share."

"Oh, like a rescue mission, then?"

"Not 'xactly," said Sweden. "W're go'n' t'look for Saami."

"She's a native tribe in the north of mine, Sweden, and Norway's lands," Finland added on seeing America's confused expression. "We haven't seen her in centuries, but, seeing as your tribes are still around, it's made us hopeful that Saami is, too."

"Wow!" South Dakota exclaimed. "That sounds like a great adventure, doesn't it, North? Can we come, too? I mean, I know it's a little forward of me to ask, but North and I love going on adventures and North, here, is the best tracker in the whole entire world."

North Dakota gave a low grunt at that.

"Aw, c'mon, North! You know you're the best tracker. I won't have you dismissing your talents, especially after all the good work you've done with them." South Dakota then turned back to the Nordics. "He's just a little shy, is all, and super modest. He thinks being too proud of your abilities is sinful, and, seeing as he's really religious, being sinful is a big no-no. But, I promise, he's really, really, really good at what he does and his preferred payment for services rendered is beer. It doesn't
even have to be fancy beer, as North's perfectly content with a generic brand. And North has been so hopeful for the chance of an adventure, lately, and we both enjoy travelling and we wouldn't be any trouble."

"Hold kjeft!" a voice snapped.

As the words were Norwegian, everyone turned to look at Norway, who just shrugged. However, they soon noticed that North Dakota was glowering at his twin, a slight tic in his cheek.

"Uh, did I also forget to mention that North and I are both fluent in a bunch of languages?" South Dakota said at a much more sedate pace.

"Well," Finland said after an extended pause. "We weren't really planning on bringing anyone else with us. But I don't really see the harm. We haven't gone on a tracking mission like this in some time and we could use some extra help. What do you all think?" he added to the other Nordics.

"If y'u want, 's f'ne with me," said Sweden.

"It's cool with me," Denmark said happily. "I want to see how tough these boys really are."

"You don't get a vote," said Norway. "You're lucky we're even letting you on this trip."

"Come on, Norge, don't be like that. We're all like brothers, here."

Norway looked decidedly unamused. Then again, he never looked amused.

"As long as neither of you slows us down," Norway said to the Dakotas, "I suppose I do not object." He looked at Iceland. "What do you think, little brother?"

"Fine, I don't care! Let's just go, already!" Iceland huffed.

"America, are you all right with your sons going with us?" Finland asked.

"Of course I am," said America with a reassuring smile. "My little dudes know what they're doing. If they want to go on a crazy, wild adventure, I'm not gonna stop them."

"Great!" South Dakota chirped. He then whipped out a large backpack that was clearly stuffed with supplies. "I'm ready for an adventure!"

"How did you pack so quickly?" Iceland said in amazement.

"I'm always prepared. North, what's that phrase you like? 'Proper planning prevents piss-poor performance.' That's it. I've even got our plane tickets." He held up the aforementioned tickets.

"Wait, how on earth did you get tickets?" said Norway. "We only just agreed to let you accompany us a moment ago."

"I told you. I'm always prepared."

"Wait, before we leave," said Finland. "Has anyone seen Sealand and Ladonia?"

At that precise moment, the two micronations in question were engaged in a fierce videogame battle at a house in Minnesota while the state, herself, made them cookies, chocolate fudge Bundt cake, and hot cocoa. How that arrangement occurred and how the Dakotas had obtained their plane tickets in exchange was best left unsaid.
"'s he go'n'a be okay?" Sweden asked as North Dakota picked his brother off the ground.

South Dakota had gotten so excited for the trip that, as soon as they had all walked out of the airport in Trondheim, he made a mad dash and crashed face-first into a parked bus. In South Dakota's defense, he was not expecting there to be objects in his immediate path, as he usually rushed out in a similar fashion whenever he arrived in his own home and had never encountered an obstruction before.

North Dakota responded with a look that basically said, 'He'll be fine. He's been hit harder than that.'

"North, hey, North, North," South Dakota mumbled. "Why are there stars out in the middle of the daytime, North?"

North Dakota rolled his eyes, set his brother back on his feet, and handed South Dakota his cane.

"I'm good, North," South Dakota tried to say. "The pain in my leg stopped halfway through the flight."

North Dakota just blinked at his brother in what could only be described as a stern way.

"Fine, fine, Mr. Pushy. I'll humor you, 'cause you're my little brother."

North Dakota quirked one brow.

"I know we don't know who was actually born first 'cause Dad won't tell us, but I'm obviously the big brother."

North Dakota raised both eyebrows and blinked at him.

"I am so! Anyway, where to, now?"

The Dakotas and the Nordics loaded into a car and made their way to Norway's house to retrieve the old camping gear which Norway had tucked away in his storage room. After making sure they had plenty of food and other necessary supplies, the team set out. Norway had chartered a ship to take them northward, closer to the Sápmi region (known to outsiders as "Lapland"), where they would begin their search; however, once they were on land, they would be relying on dogsleds.

During the voyage north, Denmark kept the Dakotas (or, at least, South Dakota) entertained with tales of the Nordics' exploits when they were younger. He made particular note of his glorious days as the self-proclaimed "King of Scandinavia." Finland would frequently add in his own details of events, usually with stories of the happier, less violent instances in the Nordics' past. Sweden, not really the talkative type, decided to do a bit of sewing to pass the time, as a few of the tents and sleeping bags had some tears that needed to be mended before any of them set foot in the frigid north. Iceland kept acting strangely furtive, especially when Denmark brought up Scandia, once again. Norway just stood at the front of the ship, staring off contemplatively into the distance.

"...Scandia was really strong and powerful," Denmark said one evening during dinner. "Strongest of all the ancients. He taught us all about how to fight and sail and make weapons. Of course, he was also good-looking, like me."

Denmark went on to describe Scandia as a tall, imposing, and physically fit man with long, windswept blonde hair, and blue-violet eyes. He had superhuman strength and would often show it off by picking up heavy objects or even dangerous animals just because he could.
"Why do you have to keep talking about Scandia?" Iceland said suddenly. "We get it, he was a great warrior and everything but you don't need to keep mentioning him every five seconds."

"What's your deal, Icey?" said Denmark. "You've been acting really weird ever since that day at the conference."

"It's nothing."

Everyone stared at him, which made Iceland become increasingly uncomfortable and drove him to storm off to the bunkroom.

The Dakotas stared up in awe as they watched the Northern Lights dancing across the sky.

The group had been travelling through Sápmi for a couple weeks. The Nordics had been impressed that neither of the boys minded the cold, save for Norway who already knew of how immune the boys had shown themselves to be during WWII.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Norway said as he glanced up at the Lights.

"Breathtaking," said South Dakota softly. "We've seen the Lights, sometimes, but not quite like this. Uncle Mandan once told us that the Lights are from the fires over which great warriors and medicine men boiled their enemies in giant cooking pots."

"That's…interesting. As a child, I was told that the Lights were the Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that fallen warriors travelled across to reach Valhalla."

"I always thought the Lights were the sparks from the tail of the fire fox, the 'revontulet,'" said Finland. "Although, I do remember Saami called the Lights 'guovssahasah,' which means 'the sun glowing in the sky in the morning or in the evening.'"

"You guys really miss this Saami lady, don't you?" said South Dakota.

"She was like a mother to us," said Norway. "Well, most of us. Denmark and Iceland never met her because we didn't meet them until Scandia took over raising us."

"Why do you guys have to keep bringing up Scandia?" Iceland grumbled again.

"What is the big deal, Iceland?" said Denmark, who had slightly charred his eyebrows while setting up the campfire. "Every time one of us mentions Scandia, you get all pouty and angry and act like you want to bite our heads off. Are you still mad at him for disappearing?"

"Of course I am!" Iceland snapped. "He left me alone to look after Greenland until you guys found us! I was stranded out there for ages with a bunch of angry tribes wanting to kill me because he walked out on…" Iceland's eyes went wide. "Forget it, it's not my place to say it."

"Iceland, what's wrong?" Finland said with concern. "You can tell us."

"No."

"You promised me we would talk about it when we got home," said Norway.

"I don't have to do what you say."
"Is this something to do with Vinland?" said South Dakota, drawing everyone's attention.

"How-how do you know about that?" Iceland asked worriedly.

"Well, Dad and Uncle Canada got this DNA test thing done…"

Iceland was very tempted to slap himself in the face. This was just like how he'd discovered that he and Norway were actually, biologically brothers.

"…I mean, none of the aunts and uncles really like to talk about it. All we really know is that Uncle Canada got briefly settled by Vikings who originally came from Iceland and who explored a little bit further south in lands that belong to Dad, now."

The other Nordics were now staring very, very intently at Iceland. Iceland, for his part, was trying to sink deeper inside his coat. Mr. Puffin, who was sitting on his shoulder, narrowed his eyes and started lightly pecking against the side of Iceland's face.

"All right, already," Iceland finally spluttered. "It all happened about a thousand years ago…"

"I-I don't want to go on this voyage," Iceland said tearfully as he looked up at Scandia's smiling face. "I'm scared, Pabbi. The ocean's really big and dangerous. I want my big brother."

"Come on, now, Little One," Scandia said, stooping down to pat the boy's head. "No tears, now. You need to learn how to be a real warrior. Warriors aren't afraid of adventures. Do you think Norge, Dane, and Sve are scared of the ocean?"

"N-no."

"You want to show them how brave and strong you are, right?"

"Y-yes, Pabbi."

"Good. Now, let's get to that ship. Erik Thorvaldsson has every confidence that this new land he's found is going to be beautiful and bounteous. And maybe we'll even get to fight some giant monsters."

"M-monsters?"

Scandia took Iceland's tiny hand in his as he led the trembling child towards the ship. Iceland looked back as Scandia lifted him up into the vessel and saw Norway standing on the docks, looking slightly irritated (which meant, inside, he was absolutely furious). Norway called out to Scandia and tried to convince him to leave Iceland behind, but Scandia brushed him off and said he was going to teach Iceland how to live like a real Viking.

Iceland spent several miserable months on that ship. Freezing, half-starved, and desperately wishing to go home. Scandia, however, just kept complaining about how nothing exciting had happened; they hadn't even encountered a single sea monster and Scandia was worried his axe would get rusty if he didn't kill something soon.

When they finally landed, the beautiful 'green land' which Erik had promised them turned out to be little more than a block of ice and rock. Shortly afterwards, they found that the land already had inhabitants, none of whom were thrilled about having strangers coming in.
One day, Iceland and Scandia were out hunting when, out of nowhere, a tall figure lunged at Scandia and tackled him to the ground. The figure was a woman; a beautiful but clearly very angry woman who was attempting to drive a stone knife into Scandia's throat. Scandia, for his part, seemed more amused than anything, especially when he found she was strong enough that he couldn't fight his way out of her grasp.

"Hello, pretty lady," Scandia said with a cocky smile.

The woman, seeing she couldn't get her knife into his throat as he held her wrists, slammed her head against his and knocked him colder than a mackerel.

"I don't really want to think too much about how things went from there," Iceland told the group. "After that meeting, though, Scandia kept following the woman around. I never learned her name, but all the tribes I encountered called her 'Mother.'"

"That was Grandma," said South Dakota. "She was Native North America. At least, she was the land that Dad and Uncle Canada represent, now, before it all got colonized."

Iceland went on to explain Greenland's origins, Scandia going on the run after he'd angered Native North America and her tribes, and how Iceland saw America and Canada as babies right before he returned to Greenland and found that Scandia was gone. He recollected his adventures alongside Leif Erikson and the building of Vinland at what was now L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Everyone sat in silence for a long time as they digested Iceland's revelation. Finally, after putting two and two together, Denmark leapt to his feet.

"America and Canada are our brothers!" he exclaimed.

"Sit down, Denmark, you're embarrassing yourself," said Norway.

But Denmark didn't listen and, instead, picked the Dakotas up and started to hug them tightly.

"That means these two really are our nephews," he added happily.

North Dakota mumbled something which Norway was fairly certain was an unkind word in Norwegian. In fact, Norway was reasonably certain it was something he'd called Denmark on more than one occasion, himself.

"But, Icey," Denmark said, at last. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Would any of you have believed me?" Iceland said. "I wrote the Vinland Saga to tell you all about the new land I found, but you thought I was making it up."

"Oh, Iceland," Finland said. "We're sorry. We just thought, after Scandia disappeared…"

"That I started imagining things? Well, Vinland was real. And, yet, no one ever acknowledged that I was the first European to ever see North America."

"That's not true," North Dakota said with a slight frown. "We Americans remember it. Why else would we celebrate Leif Erikson day?"

"You have what?"
"October 9th. It was Minnesota's idea originally, wasn't it, North? I mean, yes, the date was chosen because it was the date that the Restauration arrived in New York Harbor, beginning the first major wave of immigrants from Norway to America, but it's not like we had the exact day of the year when Erikson arrived noted down. Anyway, you don't need to worry about being remembered, Uncle Iceland. None of us have ever forgotten and I know Dad and Uncle Canada have really been hoping you guys would acknowledge the family ties. I mean, the only reason neither of them ever said anything was because they thought you all knew but just didn't care. I guess all of us have had a few miscommunications.

"Well, now that we've cleared this up, who's hungry? I brought lutefisk!"

South Dakota's cheerful demeanor helped relieve the tension that had built up and, steadily, everyone managed to relax. Iceland's previously closed-off attitude slowly lightened as the state began talking about some of the crazy things he and North Dakota had gotten up to over the years. North Dakota, for his part, ate in silence; at one point, though, the enigmatic American state shared a subtle glance with Iceland, rummaged in his pocket for a moment, and then pulled out a package of licorice.

"Lakkrís?" North Dakota said quietly, offering Iceland a piece which the Nordic accepted.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I'm afraid I won't be able to post as frequently as I was before, as I am about to start a five-month internship. I will do what I can to keep things going, so don't think I've abandoned this fic if I don't update for a long period. I also turn twenty-five next Tuesday (I will officially be one quarter of a century old).

Also, thanks to Echoed Memory for how you described North Dakota (as I'm sure you noticed, I quite liked the comparison to Hoth and Westerosi North).

Hold kjeft – Norwegian for "shut up."
Pabbi – Icelandic for "Papa."
Lakkrís – Icelandic for "licorice."

I do not recommend picking up rattlesnakes and forcing them to wear tiny top hats; North Dakota is a trained professional and the only one badass enough to get away with it. However, I do recommend looking up pictures of snakes in hats on the internet, as they are weirdly cute.

South Dakota was the location of the Wounded Knee Massacre (December 29, 1890) in which the U.S. Army Cavalry killed 150-300 Lakota men, women, and children at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The army had entered the reservation with the intention of disarming the Lakota and forcing them to move from their encampment. During the disarmament, one man refused to give up his gun and it went off accidentally. The U.S. troops mistook it as an attack and opened fire and what few Lakota men who still had guns returned fire in an attempt to protect the civilians (to add insult to injury, the U.S. government awarded twenty Medals of Honor to troops who participated in the massacre and have yet to rescind them). Because of this, not only does Lakota have an injury in his leg, but the severity of the massacre was so awful that it left a wound on the very land in which it took place (i.e. South Dakota).

According to a study I read recently, North Dakota is one of the most efficiently run
states in the U.S., so I think he gets his paperwork done months in advance so he can go and do things that peak his interest.

South Dakota's four distinct curls in his hair are meant to indicate the four faces on Mt. Rushmore (kind of like America's Nantucket). Mt. Rushmore was also created by Gutzon Borglum and his son, Lincoln Borglum, who were of Danish origins. Rushmore was originally going to be carved with the faces of Lewis and Clark (the famous explorers), Red Cloud (a leader of the Oglala Lakota), and Buffalo Bill Cody (the Wild West frontiersman and showman).

Both North and South Dakota have notable Nordic-Germanic populations. North Dakota is even the meeting place for the largest Scandinavian event in North America, Norsk Høstfest.

In WWII, Norway was occupied by the Germans. The Norwegians fiercely resisted the occupation (my dad's friend's mother was a teenage girl in Norway during the time and routinely went out to eliminate German soldiers whenever she could). The Allies (in particular the United States) even sent in spies to help the Norwegians sabotage German bases and scientific/industrial centers.

North Dakota is the largest consumer of beer in the U.S., hence why beer would be an ideal Christmas present for him (as I mentioned last chapter) and why it's his preferred method of payment for his tracking services.

My headcanon about America and Canada doing the DNA test to find out about their family is meant to mirror that scene in Hetalia between Iceland and Norway, in which archaeological excavation is meant to represent a DNA test.
Noaidi

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for being so patient with me. Work has consumed me, lately, and, on top of that, my laptop hasn't been working. I know I can work from my desktop, but I just find it easier to focus on writing when I work on my laptop.

I've kinda gotten off my state-fic tangent, but, rest assured, the next chapter will get us back on track.

Anyway, on with the story. Again, it is not my intention to offend anyone, I am simply relating historical events within the Hetalia context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

True to his word – or, rather, true to South Dakota's word – North Dakota proved to be an excellent tracker. It was as if he could see invisible clues in the snow which even the Nordics' keen eyes couldn't detect.

He still remained enigmatically silent as they made their trek. In fact, the only way the Nordics could get information from him was through South Dakota's ability to read his twin's facial expressions. Still, North Dakota's steadfast and unflappable demeanor carried with it a sense of trustworthiness; that, despite the cold and the dark and the dearth of knowledge about where specifically they were going, the party of travelers couldn't help but continue to follow him.

They had been out in the wilds for nearly three weeks.

Then, suddenly, they passed into a large, circular clearing. A strange feeling washed over them as they crossed what they assumed was the boundary line and Norway, who was more spiritually-inclined than his brothers, noticed the tinge of powerful energy emanating from large stones placed strategically along the circle. Within the clearing was a herd of reindeer, all of whom stood there idly and unconcerned with the appearance of the newcomers. In the center of the clearing was a large goahti (a kind of tent with curved poles and sometimes insulated with turf and additional wooden beams, similar to but larger than the more circular lavvu; both buildings being visually comparable to, though structurally different from, the tipis of the Native Americans of the Great Plains) and a storehouse which was set on stilts to keep it out of reach of wildlife.

It was then that they saw her. A tiny woman, she bustled about carrying wood to her home and calmly sidestepped the reindeer as they moved in and out of her way. Although Finland, Norway, and Sweden had described Saami as a mother figure to them, she bore next to no resemblance to them, with her high cheekbones and darker complexion. She was dressed in a blue gákti with red trim that had hints of green and yellow woven into it, with a pleated belt with round, silver buttons. She wore sturdy leather boots with curled toes and woven ankle wraps in the same colors as the trim of her gákti. Two long, dark brown braids of hair fell down from beneath her red, fur-lined cap.

Norway, Sweden, and Finland shared quiet looks between themselves, suddenly nervous though hiding it well from the others. As desperately as they had wanted to find Saami again, finally seeing her again in the flesh reminded them that their history with her people in the last couple centuries had been – to put it mildly – uneasy.
However, South Dakota was clearly not aware of the emotional conflicts his 'uncles' were facing in that moment and began to frantically wave his arms and call out.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Sorry to barge in, but we're looking for someone named 'Saami'! Are you her?!"

Saami looked up and, upon seeing them, dropped the bundle of firewood and pressed her hands to her mouth in shock, eyes wide in disbelief. She did not respond to South Dakota's exclamations, but, instead, slowly approached them, snow crunching softly beneath her boots as she drew closer and closer.

Norway, Sweden, and Finland found themselves staring at the ground, feelings of shame and regret making them unable to look up and see the anger and disappointment in Saami's face. The reality of the situation had finally dawned on them now that they were there. They had become so caught up in their desire to find Saami that they had overlooked the rather high possibility that she wouldn't want to see them after how their governments and citizens had treated her people.

For Norway, his government's attempts in the past (and, in some cases, in the present) to force Saami's people to assimilate into the rest of Norwegian society hovered like a grim shadow which no power could dispel. In particular, the events surrounding Alta were still simmering even now, decades after the hydroelectric plant had been built, and Norway, himself, still carried a great deal of pent-up anger over it, as well as guilt for failing to convince his parliament to rescind their decision. His guilt was less about what he'd done, as he'd personally opposed the construction of hydroelectric plant, but, rather, it was because he had tried to hold his tongue and not stir up more trouble, even as his own people cried out against the action.

Sweden's thoughts turned to that dark time between and during the World Wars. Eugenics and notions of ethnic 'purity' had been powerful toxins in the hearts and minds of countless people, including many of his own. The Statens institut för rasbiologi (State Institute for Race Biology), for instance, had for years served as nothing more than a front to promote a vile regime which had harmed thousands of his people, particularly the Saami, by means of degrading scientific studies and forced sterilization. Sweden was hardly the only one to be taken in by the eugenics movement – many European, American, and Asian countries had been deceived by it, foolishly believing that they were helping their people – but that did not absolve him from sharing in the guilt for having allowed such an ideology to take hold.

Even sweet, kind Finland was not without transgressions. While not as severe as what had happened with Norway and Sweden, Finland's government had not always treated the resident Saami with the recognition they were due. Finland had always been closer to Saami than the others, so it was often difficult for him to separate Saami culture from Finnish culture as a whole. Finland had never been willfully harmful or destructive towards Saami's people, but he sometimes forgot that he did not represent the Saami people as their personification did. Industrial development projects, such as logging and mining, in Saami lands had only made things worse.

There was a heavy silence for several minutes. However, the inevitable firestorm of rage and rejection never came.

"Boys?" Saami said softly. "Can it really be you?"

Norway, Sweden, and Finland slowly looked up to meet her eyes. They were the only thing which she physically had in common with them, her blue eyes. They were dark blue, almost mistakable for black if one did not look closely. The last time they had seen her, she had been able to look down at them with those eyes; now all three of the men, even Finland who was the shortest of the lot, seemed to tower over her.
"My boys," she said, a smile breaking over her face and tears coming into her eyes. "What took you so long?"

"You…don't hate us?" Norway asked calmly, though his almost imperceptible shifting from one foot to the other gave away his nervousness.

Her response was to pull the young man into a crushing hug. They were joined by a teary-eyed Finland and a quiet but slightly trembling Sweden. It said something about the strength and goodness of Saami's character that her love for her 'sons' overcame the hurt she had undoubtedly experienced for so long. In her heart, though, she knew the blame for their mistakes was not entirely their own; she could forgive her sons, but not their governments, their scientists, or Scandia for leading them so far from the principles she had tried to instill in them when they were children.

Denmark, Iceland, and the Dakotas watched the exchange feeling very much like they were intruding on the heartbreaking reunion. As they waited for the moment to end, North Dakota looked up at the sky, silently making calculations of their position, and then half-mumbled something under his breath.

"North," South Dakota gasped in shock. "I'm surprised at you, North."

North Dakota blinked back at him.

"No, I don't care if he deserves it, North, it's completely unethical."

North Dakota gave a soft grunt in response.

"North! You can't just take advantage of our position to launch an unplanned nuclear missile strike at Russia, no matter how much you hate him."

Saami's goahti was a cozy and inviting place.

It was, thankfully, large enough for everyone to come inside. The earth floors had been covered over with furs and pelts, so Saami and her guests could sit comfortably around the merrily crackling fire at the center of the structure. Along the walls, Saami had hung various decorations, including handmade bowls and pots, hunting gear, scrimshawed knives carved from reindeer antlers, and, most prominently, a woven copy of the Saami flag, accompanied by smaller copies of the coats of arms for the different Saami communities spread out across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and, to a lesser extent, Russia.

After the reunion between Saami and her 'sons' had broken up, Saami had happily welcomed the others she hadn't met. When they informed her that Iceland was Norway's little brother and that the Dakota twins were, in fact, their nephews, she had immediately begun fussing over them and insisted on getting them in out of the cold. She didn't seem quite sure what to make of Denmark, though, especially with how loud and talkative he became, asking every question he could think of about Norway, Sweden, and Finland before he met them during the Viking Age.

As she passed around bowls of stew to the nations and states, Saami began to regale them with stories of her days with Norway, Sweden, and Finland back in the days before borders existed and Sápmi was more like a nation than a divided region. She'd found Finland first, trying in his childlike way to catch and ride one of her reindeer; he'd had a love for the creatures since that first day and learned everything he knew about herding them from Saami. Sweden she discovered wandering around lost in a snowstorm; he'd already been raised by someone else for a time, as he appeared
older than Finland and wore more Germanic-looking clothes; Sweden never really talked much as a child, though he enjoyed learning how to make things from Saami, who taught him duodji, her traditional handicrafts.

"And what about, Norge, here?" Denmark asked eagerly. "I bet my little brother's always been the antisocial recluse he is now."

Norway shot Denmark a withering look.

"Not at all," said Saami in surprise. "He was always an energetic and friendly child." She smiled fondly, drawing on a memory of a happier time. "I remember how Norway used to follow me everywhere, like a lost reindeer calf, talking about what a sprite or troll had told him the night before."

Norway stayed quiet, though a faint dusting of pink entered his face.

"I still remember the first time I took him to a sieidi to offer prayers to Beaivi," Saami continued. "He was so excited he was bouncing up and down. And when I handed him his first drum, he was absolutely giddy."

That was a mental image which those who knew Norway would find incredibly difficult to conjure up. The stone-faced and shy Nordic nation was the last person anyone could picture as getting overexcited about getting to do something so simple as playing a drum.

"I believe I still have the drum. Yes, let me just check."

Saami began poking through a couple of large chests at the back of the goahti. After a minute or two, she made a little triumphant noise and turned back, holding a small, reindeer-hide drum with a detailed image of the World Tree on top and dangling silver charms hanging from its edges. The instrument a noaidi, a shaman, used to commune and mediate with the spirits and the gods. Norway silently accepted the instrument as Saami handed it to him. His hands shook slightly as he held it. It was the same drum he knew from his childhood, the one he thought was gone forever like Saami. He'd thought the Christian missionaries had likely burned it as a tool of witchcraft, as they'd done with other Saami drums.

Norway remained silent for the rest of the evening, even as the conversation shifted to Saami asking about what they had been doing during the centuries apart from her. Denmark decided to answer where Norway would not, expounding at length about their exploits as Vikings and the many wars they fought with other nations and each other. As the night wore on, the people huddled together in the goahti began to drift off to sleep.

Although unsure of how long he had rested, Norway awoke rather suddenly at the sound of movement outside. A quick glance around the figures curled up around the floor helped him determine that the two wayward American states were gone. Muttering quietly to himself, Norway wrapped his coat tightly around him and headed outside to find them. If the Dakotas were anything like America, they were surely getting into something they shouldn't, possibly even doing something dangerous.

Thankfully, he found after stepping outside, that they hadn't wandered far. They were simply standing out in the snow, watching the Northern Lights again.

"It's cold out here," Norway said evenly as he approached them. Neither of them turned around, as if
"Nothing we can't handle, right, North?" South Dakota said, still staring up at the sky.

North Dakota just blinked, though his gaze, too, was fixed on the lights.

"Exactly, North! Exactly!"

"Why are you out here when you should be inside sleeping?" said Norway.

"I could ask you the same thing," South Dakota said lightly.

"I only left because I saw you both were missing."

South Dakota turned and looked at him.

"Thanks for being so concerned about us, but North and I really can look after ourselves. We've made it this long without dying once. Same can't be said for many of our siblings, right, North?"

North Dakota tilted his head.

"Yeah, that time Montana accidentally swallowed one of her own grenades was pretty nasty," South Dakota continued. "But you can't really blame her for that, North. It was Virginia's and the CIA's fault, anyway."

"Do I want to know what you both are talking about?" said Norway.

"Probably not. It's not a happy story."

It was not in Norway's nature to pry into matters that were none of his business, so he wisely chose to leave that discussion alone.

"So, why are you both out here risking limbs falling off from frost bite?" he said with his usual monotone.

"We're watching the lights!"

"…Again? Haven't you seen them enough over these past few weeks? And didn't you tell us that you see them at your house sometimes, anyway?"

"Yeah, but they're never as bright over at our places as they are here! Isn't that right, North? Oh, yes, exactly, North! And they're so beautiful, how can you not want to look at them as often and as long as you can?"

"I suppose they are very beautiful, but your enthusiasm after seeing them so much is surprising to me."

"Why is it surprising? Every time you look at them, there is something different. Some new way they twist and turn. And North says that different spirits walk along them every night, so we need to be careful only to attract attention from the nice ones."

"You can see spirits?" Norway asked, looking fixedly at North Dakota.

The enigmatic state turned his gaze away from the lights to look back at Norway and Norway could finally see it in the boy's eyes. He held the same spark in his eyes that all those who possessed a second sight had. It was the same for Norway, Romania, and England and was what enabled them to
see and communicate with beings from the Other World.

"Of course he can," South Dakota said. "He can't use magic like Rhodey or Ana or Wash, but he sees things even they can't. I think Kentucky has a similar ability, but he's never brought it up."

North Dakota maintained a steady, unblinking eye-contact with Norway. Norway would be lying if he said he couldn't see something of himself reflected in that steely gaze. For a moment, Norway almost thought he could sense what was going through the boy's mind. It was more like an impression, something that couldn't be communicated with words. Perhaps it was the same thing that enabled South Dakota to make whole conversations out of his brother's limited verbal conversation. Though that may have been more a twin thing than anything else.

The impression that Norway got, though, told him that he needed to retrieve his noaidi drum. He did so, promptly. There was a presence there that night which needed to be appeased. As he ducked back outside of the goahti, drum clutched firmly in his hands, he did not see Saami watching from the shadows, a small, contented smile on her face.

Even after centuries, he still remembered the words Saami had taught him to placate spirits. The high, keening cry of the ancient song and the steady beating of the drum went up to the heavens, maybe even to Valhalla, itself.

The Dakotas watched their uncle go through that mysterious, ancient rite with a silent reverence. They had seen similar rituals done by many of their other aunts and uncles. At the core of all things, humans – and nations, too – understood there existed a power far beyond them. That there was an active, living force in all things, especially in nature, with which their lives were irrevocably intertwined.

Above them, the lights began to shine more brightly than before and strange shapes danced across the sky. Whether the lights were nothing more than particles of sunlight hitting Earth's atmosphere as science said or the Bifröst guiding spirits into the realm of the gods, it didn't matter. The lights were an integral part of the world as a whole and of Norway in particular. And sending those ancient prayers up to them that night was as essential and precious to him as his people.

Saami gave one last farewell hug to each of them.

"You will come and see me again," she said. It was not a question, just a statement of fact.

"Of course," Finland answered cheerfully. "And you will come and visit us? You deserve a place in the Nordic Council as much as any of us."

"I will come when I can, but you know I am wary of the big cities."

"Not to worry," Denmark said loudly. "We can just host it at Icey's place. His house is super small and old school."

Iceland glared at Denmark for that comment but decided it wasn't worth it to start up an argument until they were either back in a warm house where they could continue at length or else near enough to a fjord where Iceland could push Denmark off the edge without anyone noticing (not that anyone in the party but Finland would be upset).

"You are certain that I can keep this?" Norway said to Saami, holding his old noaidi drum to his chest.
"It has always been yours, my son," said Saami with a kind smile. "You don't even need to ask."

"It was really nice to meet you, Miss Saami," South Dakota said. "I hope me and North weren't intruding. North hates to be an inconvenience. Isn't that right, North?"

"It was no trouble," Saami assured them, a knowing twinkle in her eye. "You are more than welcome here, anytime. And I even permit you to call me 'Aunt Ulla,' if you would like. Ulla is my human name."

"Of course, Aunt Ulla."

They all waved goodbye as they walked out through the ring of sacred stones. Saami watched them go with a fond expression on her face, knowing she would see them again, and feeling lighter than she had in centuries. When they finally disappeared from view, she let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and was briefly startled as a slender hand rested on her shoulder before she heard a familiar voice.

"I told you things would be all right, my friend."

Saami turned to smile at the woman standing by her. To those who knew Alaska, the second woman looked like an older version of the wild northern state, with her long, dark hair and the thin, delicate tribal tattoos of an Inuit across her cheeks.

"I never doubted it for an instant, Nukilik," Saami said. "Tell me, how did you know they would be coming to find me?"

"My dear niece, Alaska, found out and informed me," Inuit replied. "And, of course, how could I keep such a thing from as dear a friend as you, Ulla."

The two female tribes linked arms and walked together through the pasture. Inuit and Saami, two ancients who had managed to survive where empires like Egypt and Rome had fallen to ruin, had formed a bond together decades ago that had only strengthened in recent days. Saami had once saved Inuit from starvation and death by teaching her the ways of reindeer-herding, now Inuit had repaid that kindness by ensuring Saami's happy reunion with her lost 'sons.' Inuit had heard Saami's sorrowful tale and helped her to release all her years of anger and hurt so that she could remember how dear her 'sons' truly were to her. Inuit, herself, knew the pain that separation and betrayal by loved ones could cause and she would not allow her friend to fall into the temptation of hate.

Love, after all, is a magic stronger than any other.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Special thanks to Abbyforth for providing information for this chapter. I was aware that there was tension between the Nordic nations and the Saami, but I didn't have a lot of info before on the historical context. Also, thank you for informing me that "Lapland" has a derogatory connotation (I knew it is rude to call a Saami person a 'Laplander,' but I was not aware that it applied to the region, itself); I will remember not to use such terms again.

The Alta Controversy surrounded the building of a hydroelectric plant and dam in the Alta River during the 70s and 80s. This would create an artificial lake which would lead
to displacement of local Saami populations and a dramatic impact on reindeer migration. Despite widespread protests, including riots (the first time since WWII that Norwegians were arrested for violating anti-riot laws), the Norwegian parliament reaffirmed their decision to build the dam.

Sweden, like many countries in the early twentieth century, had been blindsided by the eugenics movement, the ideology which inspired the Nazi vision of "racial purity." As I said, Sweden was hardly the only one involved in eugenics; people actually believed that breeding out "imperfections" from the human race was for the good of society. Sadly, some people still seem to think that just because a person has a perceived "defect" that they are not deserving of life (*Glares at a certain American state who shall remain nameless; you know who you are*). The subject of eugenics will come up again in this fic, especially the effects it had on some of the states. As for my own personal views on eugenics, I've seen the movie 'Gattaca,' so I'm really, really uncomfortable with the thought of trying to modify the human race as if we were choosing a pattern for a designer handbag, treating human beings as if we are a commodity that can be bought, sold, and disposed of at someone else's discretion.

From what I've looked up about Finland, the biggest issue for the Saami there seems to be cultural appropriation and misrepresentation by non-Saami. The tourism industry in Finland appears to be the biggest culprit.

Technically, Russia should be in the group searching for Saami, too, because Russia also includes Saami lands. However, I have made a decision that Russia was never as close to her as the Nordics and that he only met her in person a few times when he was a child.

Thanks to T3chi3 for informing me that North Dakota used to be the site of nuclear missile silos during the Cold War and how the missiles were aimed right at Moscow. I think ND still harbors dreams of nuking Russia.

The thing with Montana and Virginia will be brought back up again later.

Saami's human name, "Ulla," is a reference to Ulla Pirttijärvi.

Inuit's name, "Nukilik," means "one who is strong" according to the source I used (correct me if that's wrong).

There are a few Saami living in Alaska. Apparently, they were brought over to teach reindeer-herding to the Inuit when whaling and fishing became difficult for them, so I think Saami and Inuit are friends because Saami saved Inuit from starving to death. I know the twist at the ending was a little sudden, but I needed to find an explanation for why Saami would be so forgiving. My thought was that Inuit, as her friend, helped her through the grief and anger and find the strength to forgive.
North Star

Chapter Notes

Not sure what disclaimer to put here. Just remember to leave me some reviews, I guess. I was honestly expecting more reaction from people for the last chapter.

Warning: Descriptions of gory warfare-related violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dark grey Sorel boots tapped lightly against the tile floor of the airport. A head of smooth, light blonde hair tilted back and forth in time with a song that could only be faintly heard coming from a set of white earphones.

"Why are they not here, yet, eh?" a voice snapped.

The person listening to the music did not answer. Instead, she began to hum along with the tune.

"Mathilda, did you hear me?" the second person demanded.

Still receiving no answer, the impatient person reached up and yanked the earphones off her companion. With their removal, the sounds of Prince's "Purple Rain" could be heard more clearly. The owner of the headphones turned and her serene expression became fixed into a bland smile.

"Uff-da! What's yuhr trouble, Freya?" she said, accent somewhat nasal and her vowels drawn out.

"I was asking why your brothers aren't here, yet."

"Don't be geddin' all worked up, now. Do yuh need a snack? I brought Chex mix, if yuh'd like some."

"I don't want any Chex mix!" Freya shouted, whilst simultaneously snatching the bag out of 'Mathilda's' hands, opening it, and grabbing a handful of the contents.

"There's no need'uh be worried, Freya. Uff-da, here they come, now."

Just as she said, the group of tall, blonde nations and states appeared within view. Finland and Denmark were the more effusive in their farewells to the Dakotas, though Norway and Iceland did wish the boys a safe journey and expressed a wish for them to visit again and Sweden looked to have the faintest hint of a smile.

"Uff-da!" 'Mathilda' called out, waving to the group. "Over here, liddle brothers!"

The Nordics looked up at the interruption and were slightly taken aback. The girl waving at them looked a good deal like a female version of Norway. Only with a smile so wide it looked painful. Her hair was long and she wore a star-shaped hairclip on one side of her face. Her violet-blue eyes sparkled, though there was a darkness around them that was difficult to describe. She was dressed rather cutely in a pleated skirt – that was (to those not immune to the cold) a bit too short for the weather – and a frilly blouse, both of them in a shade of rich, dark purple. One odd thing out about her attire was that she had a lurid purple and gold North Face jacket slung under her arm, as if she
The girl standing beside 'Mathilda,' arms folded and a disapproving scowl on her face, also had a pronounced Nordic appearance. While 'Mathilda' resembled Norway, the second girl looked considerably like Iceland. Her silvery, white-blonde hair fell just above her shoulders, a braid framing either side of her head (fastened in the back with a light blue bow). Her eyes were rather striking, looking almost ocean blue in one angle or violet in another. She was dressed more conservatively than her companion, wearing a skirt that went past her ankles and a turtleneck blouse.

"Heya, sis!" South Dakota called back, waving at 'Mathilda.' "Heya, cuz!"

'Freya' grumbled as she was dragged over to the group by 'Mathilda.' South Dakota promptly introduced the Nordics to them before turning around and introducing 'Mathilda' as his and North Dakota's sister, Minnesota, and the grouchy girl as their cousin, Manitoba.

"What're you two doing here, anyway, sis?" asked South Dakota.

"Oh, well, yuh know, we were here to make sure yuh got home safe," said Minnesota. "We also were returnin' a couple somethin's."

There was a loud crash nearby and high-pitched, childish laughter. Sealand and Ladonia came sprinting into view, both with traces of soot on their clothes and clearly having been up to something which everyone present knew they had best not ask about.

"Sealand, Ladonia," Finland exclaimed. "What is going on? I thought you both were at one of your micronation meetings."

"No, we've been playing videogames at Miss Minnie's house," Sealand said proudly.

"She and a couple of her siblings make their own videogames," Ladonia added. "And she helped me fix a few glitches with my laptop." He proudly held up the device which bound him to existence (it wasn't easy being an internet-based micronation, after all).

"Oh, ja, jus' happy tuh help, yuh know," said Minnesota.

"Can we go, already, eh?" Manitoba said, her face looking a bit flushed as she shifted nervously on her feet. She wouldn't say it out loud, but there were too many people around her for her liking.

"Plane's not leavin' yet, Freya. Why, we could have a whole game of duck-duck-grey duck!"

"Knowing how long it takes you to say 'goodbye,' I think every minute counts."

At that moment, two panicked figures rushed into view. They kept looking over their shoulders and, upon seeing the Nordics, hurried over to them.

"Estonia, Latvia, what's wrong?" Finland asked as his old friends approached.

"We may have said one or two things that made Mr. Russia mad," Estonia said, wincing.

"It was all my fault," Latvia added fearfully. "I just can't keep my mouth shut whenever he stares at me like that. He's going to hurt us bad, this time."

"Uff-da! I beg yuhr pardon," said Minnesota. "But did you say 'Russia' is chasin' yuh?"

"Yes," said Estonia. "He's a big, scary nation who likes beating people with his metal pipe."
"Ja, I know who he is." Her smile, already rather unsettling, became terrifying in how it split her face. "I've been hopin' fuhr a reunion."

No one had much time to think about what she said as a smiling Russia loomed into view, metal pipe in hand.

"Estonia! Latvia!" Russia called out in a sing-song tone.

The unfortunate Baltic nations ducked for cover behind the Nordics, who looked ready to jump into action if need be. However, they needn't have bothered. Minnesota had turned to face Russia, her own smile looking rather menacing as she stared him down. Russia skidded to a halt, his face falling into one of disbelief.

"Uff-da! It's so nice huh see yuh again, Mr. Russia," said Minnesota. "Why, we haven't seen each other since the Winter Olympics back in '80. How've yuh been?"

Russia slowly began to back away, studiously avoiding any sudden movements. Minnesota took one step forward and Russia bolted, screaming something which, loosely translated, meant "Demon hell-spawn." The Nordics and Baltics stared at Minnesota while the Dakotas and Manitoba just rolled their eyes.

"Minnie, did you really have to terrorize the man again, sis?" said South Dakota. "He probably has PTSD after what you and Massachusetts did to him in the rink all those years ago."

"I never did anythin' too terrible, SD."

North Dakota gave her a piercing look.

"I didn't," Minnesota protested.

"She didn't," Manitoba added calmly. "Beating someone half to death and laughing as they run away in tears with almost all their teeth missing is perfectly acceptable in a hockey rink."

"So much for your Hippocratic Oath, Minnie," said South Dakota.

"Hippocratic Oaths end the second yuhr skates touch the ice," said Minnesota, still terrifyingly cheery. "No laws of man or God can protect yuh there."

"She's as scary as Mr. Russia," said Latvia.

"Latvia, don't say things like that," Estonia said frantically.

"No worries, new friends," said Minnesota. "I'm not a homicidal maniac like Russia. Or Alaska. Or Maine. Or Saskatchewan."

"Cousin Saskatchewan isn't a homicidal maniac," said South Dakota.

"You haven't seen her handle a prison shiv, eh?" said Manitoba.

Minnesota hummed to herself as she hung up her North Face jacket on her coat hook and kicked her boots off by the door.

That had been a delightful little sojourn. She did wish she could've visited longer, but they had had a
plane to catch. Meaning she had to cut her goodbyes short; really, half an hour wasn't nearly long enough to say a proper farewell, especially to family. It was nice to finally meet the Nordics and the two Baltics she hadn't met (but she figured they would be nice, since Mr. Lithuania was friends with them and he was nice, too).

Still, she wasn't sure she could handle extended trips outside her land, anymore. After all, it was difficult enough visiting her siblings because so few of them had ready access to Caribou coffee.

She took a thoughtful sip of the cup of rich mocha in her hand. Honestly, how anyone could prefer Starbucks was completely beyond her. She couldn't possibly be expected to go without her Caribou fix, especially when the only alternatives were nowhere near her standards (she flinched, ever-so-slightly, as she remembered the time Massachusetts gave her Dunkin' Donuts coffee, citing it as "the best evah"; were she not the nice, kind, and polite person she was, she would have dumped the stuff on his head).

Regardless, the experience had been worth it, especially since she got the chance to say a 'hello' to Mr. Russia. Such a nice fellow, if a little skittish. She never could figure out why he and her father were such fierce adversaries, especially when they both liked making friends, drinking booze, and shooting guns like every normal, reasonable person. Besides, the two had been best buddies at one point, even if it was more than a century ago.

"Oh, well," she said, shrugging. "I s'pose it's just how things are. Hmm, I think I'm in the mood fuhr some tater tot hot dish, tonight."

"Sounds good to me, Minnie," said a voice behind her.

It was to Minnesota's credit that she did not show the faintest indication of being startled. Or, perhaps, it was because jump-scares were so commonplace in the Jones family that most of the states knew to expect one of their siblings to pop out at odd moments.

"Uff-da! Penny, I was not expectin' yuh," said Minnesota evenly. "I'd'uh tidied up, a bit, if yuh'd called me, earlier."

"You're always tidy, Minnie," Pennsylvania said, eyes slightly narrowed. They were brown; so 'Sylvia' wasn't at home, then. "Sorry to barge in on you, but I knew you wouldn't mind."

Even though Pennsylvania's mind had fractured, sometimes parts of the different personalities would bleed into each other. 'Penny' hated to inconvenience people, but would still enter one of her siblings' homes uninvited if she really needed someone around. Considering she wasn't with Massachusetts or Ohio, she likely wanted some girl-only time and so Minnesota was her first choice.

And Minnesota could never say 'no' to her favorite older sister.

"I'll get supper on," she said.

It was a quiet, casual evening. The two sisters chatted amicably, though Minnesota did pout a little when Pennsylvania kept insisting that "hot dish" was actually called "casserole" by the rest of the world. They talked about hockey – which they both played with a vicious devotion – and about how idiotic and intolerant some of their siblings were. Once they finished eating, they curled up on the couch to watch television.

Minnesota kept a watchful eye on Pennsylvania throughout the evening. Sometimes, on her impromptu visits, Minnesota could see the remnants of who her sister used to be, back in the days when she was wholly one person. Before the horrors of the Civil War damaged her…both of them.
Smoke and ashes filled the air.

One soldier got blown to pieces by a direct hit from a cannonball, right in front of her. His limbs scattering everywhere and blood spattering across her face, filling her nostrils with the scents of rust and bile.

Shouted orders rang out from the commanding officers, cries of pain from the dying, screams of terror from the civilians. Guns and cannons raining down a hellfire of destruction as if it were the very end of all days. This was no game. No childish disagreement or domestic squabble. This was cold, calculated, and brutal. This was meant to burn.

Just like the rest of the war would be. They'd all learned after the savagery of Antietam that neither side would give in without shedding innumerable quantities of human blood. Unlike at Antietam, though, at least no one had come out to watch the battle for entertainment this time – as though death and suffering were some amusing little spectacle.

She shouldn't even have been there. Minnesota was only a child, literally five years old. But she was there, with her people, fighting to drive the Southerners out of Gettysburg. Watching thousands upon thousands of men being slaughtered.

She was all alone, now. She'd gotten separated in the confusion. Thanks to her small size, Minnesota was able to duck in and out of the surge of bodies rushing about amidst the fray. She tried to call out, but her high little voice was drowned by the noise of battle.

Then she saw them.

Pennsylvania sprawled on the ground. Her normally crisp and clean blue uniform was ripped, dirty, and stained with blood from a gaping wound in her side that still oozed fresh. Her face, caked in mud and smeared with yet more red, was contorted into a pained snarl as she glared at the figure standing over her. Her eyes were red, too.

Virginia's expression was hollow. Eyes as steely grey as her own tattered uniform looked down on Pennsylvania as if she were nothing more than an insect about to be squashed. A white-gloved hand held a pistol point-blank at Pennsylvania's head, while the other hand rested on the blood-stained saber at her side.

"I hate to do this, sister," Virginia said, not a hint of regret or remorse in her tone. "But needs must."

Click.

Bang!

Virginia slumped to the ground. The back of her skull blown open. Seeping in red and bits of bone.

Minnesota still clutched the small gun in her hands as she shook. Smoke plumed from the weapon. Thick and acrid.

She'd just killed her sister. Her own sister. She'd shot her while her back was turned. Her sister. Her enemy. A traitor. An invader. A butcher. A slaver.

She'd shot her. She'd killed her.
Pennsylvania was laughing hysterically and Minnesota...felt nothing at all.

Minnesota didn't realize her hands were trembling until she felt Pennsylvania's strong grip steadying them. Kind brown eyes stared into troubled violet.

That battle. That horrible battle had damaged them both in ways deeper than physical scars. Pennsylvania's mental state had deteriorated ever since that day and was fractured completely when she checked herself into that vile mental asylum. Minnesota became numbed towards violence and gore -- it was why she was so effective as a doctor -- and always forced herself to be cheerful and nice no matter what -- because admitting what she truly thought and felt was so terrifying she would've been sick if she tried.

It was something of an unspoken credo for many in the family: Smile and laugh through the pain, no matter how bad it gets.

"Everything's fine," Pennsylvania said, wrapping a comforting arm around Minnesota's shoulders.

Perhaps that was what helped the Jones family work, in the end. They were, all of them, damaged in some way. So, at the end of the day, they all had at least one other person there for them who understood what they were going through.

It was shortly before Christmas that America called for an Awesome Trio meeting.

America decided to take them camping at one of Minnesota's many lakes. By 'camping,' of course, he meant hiding out at an ice-fishing shed to get drunk and avoid the Christmas shopping crowds for a while. The other guys were pretty down with the idea, though it would be a miracle if they actually caught anything considering Prussia kept screaming at the fish that they would, "Be caught by my awesomeness!"

"Here's to...I don't know what to toast to, now," Denmark slurred a bit. "We've already toasted to Christmas, to a prosperous New Year, to fish, to my axe-"

"To my awesomeness," Prussia added.

"To superheroes," America concurred.

"And to Hans Christian Andersen," Denmark concluded. "What should we toast to, next?"

"How about we toast to booze?" Prussia suggested.

"Yeah, here's to booze," said America, raising his beer can. "The cause of and solution to all of life's problems."

As the Trio proceeded with their beer-chugging, they were unaware that England and France were on another spying mission. England was certain that, even if America wouldn't open up to him, he wasn't likely to keep secrets from his obnoxious drinking buddies. That was how England and France ended up crouched outside the fishing hut, listening to the Awesome Trio's conversation. It would have been easier to hear, though, if France would stop complaining about the cold and how it was playing hell with his skin and his hair.
"Would you bloody shut up?" England hissed. "I am trying to listen."

"But it is freezing out here," France said, melodrama tingling his voice. "I am liable to perish from frostbite. Ugh, my beautiful face would turn blue from exposure. The mere thought is horrifying."

"Yuh know, if yuh hate the weather so much, maybe Iowa would be more yuhr speed," a new voice said with an air of condescension.

England and France jumped a bit at the sight of the girl who had snuck up on them. Taking stock of her appearance, both nations let out very unmanly screams.

Considering that Minnesota was wearing a blood-spattered doctor's uniform and carrying a chainsaw in one hand and a bulging, dark-stained burlap sack in the other, one couldn't exactly blame them. The fact that she was giving a serial-killer smile didn't help the situation any.

"What's going on out there?!" America shouted from inside the fishing hut. "It sounded like two little girls are in trouble! Don't worry, girls! The hero will save you!" He threw open the door, though his face fell when he saw the actual situation. "False alarm, dudes. It's just Iggy and France."

"America, there is a psychotic girl with a chainsaw about to kill us and that's all you can say?" England said furiously, though his eyes remained fixed on the chainsaw.

"Uff-da! I wasn't gunna kill them," said Minnesota.

"Guys, Minnesota isn't going to kill you," America repeated. "She's a doctor."

"A doctor with a chainsaw?" England said incredulously.

"Not mine," Minnesota said. "Took it off a…nice person who didn't fully know how tuh properly use it. He'll be one leg fewer than most folks, sadly. 'Sides, if I was tuh try and kill someone, I'd use a wood-chipper. Chainsaws are more Texas's style."

"Minnie, I don't think you needed to add that last part," America said, noticing the way everyone took a step back from Minnesota. He also noticed that she'd carefully avoided mentioning what was in the burlap sack. He then turned to England and France. "What were you guys doing out here, anyway? I never figured you two for outdoorsy types. Or are you just here for an ice-fishing booze trip, like us?"

"They were eavesdroppin' on yuh, Dad," said Minnesota, an accusing glint in her eyes.

"Is that right, guys? You were spying on one of our Awesome Trio meetings?"

"I suppose we should've expected this," said Prussia, nodding solemnly. "Clearly, England and France wanted to learn the secrets to our awesomeness but were too embarrassed to ask for our awesome sagely wisdom."

England was about to protest the ridiculousness and baselessness of that assumption, only for France to cut him off by slapping a hand over his mouth.

"Ah, oui, Prussia, mon ami," France said, seizing the presented opportunity. "We have both been dying to know what makes your trio so, erm, 'awesome,' as you say."

That was all the prompting Prussia needed to drag the two into the hut to join the cheerful and boozy gathering. When the egotistical former nation handed them both beers, it required France stomping hard on England's foot to keep his partner in crime from drinking out of instinct (it was hard to get
information if you were deep in your cups, after all).

Before she left, Minnesota gave everyone a check-over to ensure they were staying warm and also drinking water to balance out the alcohol – dehydration was as much of a risk in cold as in heat, and even harder to notice if one was drinking large quantities of alcohol. As she worked, Prussia and Denmark began expounding on the things they did that made them qualify as 'awesome.'

"America," Denmark said, eyes following Minnesota, still amazed by the resemblance the state bore to Norway, "I do have a question about something awesome of yours. I still don't understand how your states came about. I know you've briefly mentioned…" He bit his tongue, his eyes darting back to Minnesota – who was clearly listening intently. He wasn't entirely sure it was appropriate to bring up Mexico or America's mysterious wife in front of the girl. "But I'm still a little confused about how your states' existence is possible."

"Ja, I agree with Dane," said Prussia. "The Code of the Awesome Trio demands details!"

England and France sat up attentively, inwardly satisfied that they were finally getting some of the answers they hoped for. They knew that, even if they couldn't get the truth from America, he wouldn't keep something like that secret if asked directly by his friends.

America shared a brief look with Minnesota. The state just shrugged and smiled.

"They're yuhr friends, Dad," she said. She grabbed her things, including the burlap sack – the contents of which still remained a mystery which none of the nations were too keen to investigate – and made her way out the door. "I'll see yuh 'round, Dad. I godda be back at the hospital. Have fun with yuhr fishin' trip…"

She spent another twenty minutes adding on additional goodbyes to each person before saying 'goodbye' to her father again. America kind of wished she hadn't cut it so short, as everyone turned back to look at him expectantly once she disappeared from sight.

"Well, it's a bit of a long story," he explained, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "And not all my states came about the same way. It all started a couple years after I got my independence…"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Next chapter is going to start a retrospective about America seeing each of his states for the first time (from Delaware to Ohio, for starters; the others will come up in a Part II).

Minnesota is called the "Scandinavia of the U.S." Norwegian is the second-largest ancestry group in the state (right behind German).

Minnesota was deeply involved with the tech boom. A large number of engineers, specifically in computer-programming, moved to the state to conduct their work, creating one of the first major centers for computer research.

Minnesota is also the center for tremendous strides in medical research and development. It was where the Mayo Clinic was founded and where the first heart transplant was performed.
Minnesotans play duck-duck-grey duck instead of duck-duck-goose.

In the 1980 "Miracle on Ice," the hockey team which beat the Soviet Union's was made up of players from the University of Minnesota and Boston University. Minnesota is a hockey demon like her Uncle Canada. Pennsylvania is also a ruthless hockey player (Philadelphia Flyers, anyone?).

Minnesotans also played a pivotal role in the Civil War. When Governor Alexander Ramsey heard about the attack on Fort Sumter, he marched straight to the White House and pledged Minnesota's support for the Union (making it the first state to do so). The 1st Minnesota Volunteer Infantry was instrumental in the Battle of Gettysburg. Canada has the largest Icelandic population outside of Iceland. The largest Icelandic-Canadian population is in Manitoba.

Manitoba's eye color is a reference to the Hetalia anime where Iceland's character design colors changed (he wasn't the only character to get a redesign, but it was pretty noticeable to me); his eyes were kind of ocean blue in the initial seasons and then violet in The Beautiful World and The World Twinkle.

Could any of my Canadian readers please give me more info about some stereotypes you have for people from the different provinces/territories (I've found some, but it's mostly about Ontario [specifically Toronto], British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec, but not much about the others). I found a few things about Manitoba which influenced my character design for her, but I wish I had more viewpoints.
Chapter Notes

The birth of the states (Part One: States 1 to 17). Featuring cameos by certain historical figures; I just wanted to write Founding Fathers doting on their states. This was a doozy to write; longest chapter I've ever written, I think.

I admit it, I was listening to songs from the musical Hamilton when I was writing this. Yes, even I have fallen under the influence of Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Also, this:

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."
- Preamble to the United States Constitution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 7th, 1787. Early hours of the morning.

"Are we there yet?" America said with a groan. He'd asked that same question about five times in the last twenty minutes.

"No, we are not, Alfred," said his very annoyed chaperone.

"Well, how much further is it to Philadelphia?"

"How am I to tell? It's black as pitch outside."

America made a disgruntled noise in the back of his throat. The whole business with the new Constitution the Congress talked about during the summer was really driving him over the edge. People were arguing back and forth about state rights and individual liberties and it was all so confusing and frustrating. At least it hadn't been put into effect, yet, so he would be back to Philadelphia in plenty of time to look everything over before he had to sign any paperwork (and he wasn't signing anything at all until he was absolutely certain that his people's rights would be protected, just like Patrick Henry told him – actually, Mr. Henry's words had been more along the lines of "Philadelphia is full of rats" and "always read the fine print" and "For the love of God, America, make sure there is a guarantee of individual and state rights before you do anything!").

The journey, so far, had been long and tedious, and Alfred had not been in the best of moods, lately. Actually, he was worried he was getting sick. He'd had terrible stomach problems recently; something which he had attributed to the weird food cravings he'd also been having. He didn't understand how that could be, though, as years of eating England's disgusting slop had left America with an iron stomach. And, to top it all off, he'd had a splitting headache since the day before. It was as though a tiny person (or persons) was living his head and swimming around and kicking at his brain.

"Is there at least a town we can stop at for the night?" America said. "It's cold and dark and I need
"Oh, very well," his companion said waspishly. The man then leaned out of the carriage window and asked the driver if they were close to a place to stop for the night. Fortunately, the driver announced that they were only a mile or so off from Wilmington, Delaware.

While America's chaperone wanted to try continuing on at least a little further, America was adamant that he needed food, warmth, and a bed for what was left of the night. As it turned out, it was rather fortunate that America insisted they find a place to stay, as a cold front had moved in, causing the roads to become somewhat treacherous with all the ice. They ended up having to remain at the little inn they'd found refuge at for a couple of days. However, on the evening of that first day, something strange happened.

Although America had gotten the food and rest he'd wanted, he was not his usual boisterous self when he emerged from his room well-past midday. His head was throbbing worse than ever and, at one point, his nose started bleeding profusely. The kindly old landlady of the inn ushered him back up to his room, while America's traveling companion and the driver both chatted worriedly about what could be wrong with their nation.

When evening came around, America was fighting back screaming at the pain in his head. No one was sure what to do for him. The local doctor was sent for, but he couldn't even begin to fathom what was happening. Suddenly, America began convulsing and hyperventilating while those present simply watched on in concern and bewilderment.

Then, suddenly, there was a bright flash that forced the humans present to look away, for fear of being blinded. When they looked back, America's forehead was bloody, as though his skull had been split open, despite the lack of a wound. In addition to this, they realized that America was not alone on his bed. There, crying and covered head-to-toe in blood and viscous fluids, was a newborn baby girl.

America groaned and sat up, clutching at his head.

"What just happened?" he grumbled. "Was I drinking or…?"

His vision was slightly blurry, but America could detect the expressions of pure astonishment on the faces of the people in the room. It was then that he noticed the loud cry of the baby beside him, causing him to glance down at her. When the baby saw his face, she stopped crying and stared up at him with big, dark blue eyes.

It took a few moments for what he was seeing to register.

"Are…are you mine?" America stammered out to the baby.

The little girl, with a look far too knowing for a newborn, gave a small smile at him. America found that whatever else he might have said then was caught in his throat. A child. His child. It seemed an impossibility. England had never told him about this. Certainly, he knew he had siblings, but he'd always assumed that all nations merely 'popped' into existence at a certain point and that there were no real blood ties between any of the personifications. And, yet, here she was. A little girl who seemed to have so close a tie to his heart that it was almost painful to think that he had ever been without her.

He scooped up the blood-soaked baby in his arms, not caring that his nightshirt was probably going to be permanently stained. His eyes began to fill with warm tears as it dawned on him that, yes, this was his child. His daughter.
Delaware, a voice echoed in the back of his head. Her name is 'Delaware.'

But how could it be Delaware? Delaware had been around for a long time and America had never seen a personification of that colony. At least, as far as he was aware, he hadn't. The only thing going on at the moment was the ratification of the Constitution. Could that have been it? With the states signing their acceptance of the Constitution, did they become his to this extent?

America was still busy trying to wrap his mind around everything, so he was rather startled when the landlady came over to him with some clean cloth and a small basin of warm water. America carefully handed Delaware over to her to let the experienced old matron clean the child, which the woman did with a gentle and almost reverent care.

"What in the name of all that is holy just happened?" said America's chaperone.

"It seems that, today, we welcome the first state to the Union," America replied with a tired but happy smile. "Everyone, this is Delaware."

The men in the room just stood there in open-mouthed shock while the landlady finished cleaning up the baby. She then handed Delaware to one of the maids, who had been helping her tend America when they had believed him to be ill, and went off to fetch some blankets and sent another maid off to retrieve the old family cradle from the storage room. Within a matter of minutes, baby Delaware was snuggled up and sleeping in the cradle as America watched on in silent wonder and joy.

"We just sent for a clerk to come in to write up the birth certificate," America's chaperone said, still looking somewhat awkward about the whole business.

America gave a faint hum in response.

"You should probably think up a name for her," the man continued.

A name? He didn't know the first thing about naming a child! He'd never realized before now that he needed to! America quickly thought through all the female names he knew, but none of them quite seemed to fit.

"Um, do you have any ideas?" America asked.

"Well, you could name her 'Athena,' like the Greek goddess of wisdom who sprung from the head of her father Zeus. That would be rather apropos."

America's brow furrowed in thought. It wasn't a bad suggestion. After all, as an educated man, America was familiar with elements of Classical myth and could easily see the parallels in the situation. But what if he had more daughters born in the same manner? The name could just as easily apply to them. Besides, while Delaware had an intelligent glint in her blue eyes, the name just did not seem to suit her.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?" said the kindly landlady, who had entered the room upon hearing the subject of their conversation.

"Go ahead," America said brightly.

"Well, have you considered the name 'Christina'?"

"Hmm? Why 'Christina'?"

"Ah, you see, sir, this town was built upon the site of an old fortress named 'Fort Christina.' It was
the largest settlement of the New Sweden colony back in its day. I…well, my mother's people were originally Swedes who came here, so we remember the history."

America remembered something, too. He knew that Wilmington had had an oddly familiar quality about it when he saw it. This was where that big, scary nation, Sweden, and that sweet-faced nation, Finland, had tried to find him. As a child, he had been so intimidated by Sweden that he had run away each time the European country had attempted to approach him. Looking back, America couldn't help but wonder faintly what life would have been like if he had gone with Sweden and Finland when he'd had the chance. Still, there was little point in looking back on the what-could-have-beens. What America needed to do was focus on the here-and-now.

But that didn't mean he shouldn't pay respect to his history and origins.

"Christina Jones," he said. "That will do nicely."

Those Founding Fathers who were serving as the delegates to the Continental Congress were completely unprepared when America burst into the room, waving a baby around in front of them and screaming, "Look at this thing I made! She's pure and perfect and I made her! Everyone tell me how wonderful she is!"

Oddly enough, it was Hamilton who decided to ask the question that everyone was thinking.

"America, who is that baby?" he said.

"This is Christina Jones, the state of Delaware!" America proclaimed happily.

At least three men present in the room fainted. Many others just froze up and stared blankly, as though not fully comprehending what America had just told them. Hamilton looked as though he wasn't certain if he should be happy for his country or screaming in terror that at least thirteen miniature versions of Alfred were going to be running around doing whatever they pleased in the near future (because Hamilton knew there was no way that Alfred understood the first thing about raising children; if everyone had just listened to his plan for how the government should be organized, this would never have happened...maybe).

Madison, on the other hand, had already bounded up to America and was eagerly encouraging him to tell him all about how baby Delaware came to be. Franklin, too, had approached and, with that sly smile of his and a twinkle in his eye, asked if Delaware should expect to be a big sister soon (he knew damn well that Pennsylvania would be entering the union in a few days, he'd been talking it over with the other Pennsylvania delegates). John Dickinson looked as though he was about to cry at how beautiful and pure his state was.

"General Washington, sir," America said with a cheeky grin to his most prominent – and some would say 'favorite' – father-figure and held the little baby girl out in front of him. "Aren't you going to say 'hello' to Delaware?"

George Washington was not a man normally given to outward displays of extreme emotion (well, unless he was angry; in that case, he would shout so loudly the trees would shake). Indeed, throughout the course of the Convention, in which the men present had been drawing up the Constitution, the only indications anyone could gather of his opinions on certain topics were when he either smiled or frowned; the rest of the time, he basically said nothing. When faced with America grinning at him and proudly showing him the newborn state of Delaware, one could be forgiven for
thinking that those were tears in his eyes (it was a trick of the light, surely).

The fact that Washington insisted on holding the little girl throughout the rest of the meeting and silently glared at anyone who tried to ask for a chance to hold her, too, was purely a sign of the soon-to-be-president's devotion to protecting the new state from any potential danger and had no emotional connection whatsoever.

Of course.

December 12th, 1787. Evening.

"You are truly a sneak, Mr. Franklin," America grumbled as he sat in bed, nursing a glass of brandy. His head was still throbbing slightly from what had transpired about an hour earlier.

"My dear boy, whatever do you mean?" Franklin said with that knowing glint in his eyes.

America just muttered something under his breath and took another sip of his drink. Franklin had invited him to stay at his house in Philadelphia for the Christmas season. America quickly realized it was because the old goat wanted the chance to witness the creation of America's states. Of which there were now two.

And Franklin had known it would happen. He always was a few steps ahead of everyone, even his own nation.

As soon as they were put into the cradle together, Pennsylvania had started clinging to Delaware and smiling a very wide, eerily-familiar grin that America was certain reminded him of someone, but, for the life of him, he couldn't remember who.

If America had thought Delaware's birth had been painful, Pennsylvania's birth had made it seem like being tickled by an angel's wing in comparison. At one point, America was certain that someone had fired off a cannon inside his head it hurt so horribly. Still, one look from Pennsylvania's pretty eyes had made the whole ordeal worth it.

America was really starting to gain a healthy respect for mothers.

"At least you won't have to worry about the next one anytime soon," Franklin said pleasantly. "I'd say you have another, oh, five or six days before another state decides to ratify the Constitution."

America groaned and collapsed back against his pillow.

"Penelope Sylvia Jones. Beautiful name."

"Yes. Very fitting for such a noble state."

"'Penelope' for the clever and faithful wife of the great Odysseus. 'Sylvia' like 'Rhea Silvia,' the mother of Romulus and Remus. Yes, truly a well-chosen name for Pennsylvania."

As the Founding Fathers all chatted away about the human name America had chosen for little Pennsylvania, he couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed. In truth, he hadn't actually thought much about the meanings behind the names he had chosen for her. He just thought he was being clever.
giving her two names that, when said together, sounded something like her state name. There was no way he could ever let his 'Fathers' know that fact, though.

Pennsylvania, herself, already seemed to be basking in the attention being heaped upon her. Delaware, by contrast, was being rather shy and kept trying to crawl over to America, only for her little sister to grab onto her to keep her from leaving.

America could already feel the headache his next state was going to bring him. It was hovering there like a storm about to break loose.

December 18th, 1787.

New Jersey came into his life in a whirlwind of color and furious screams. Those big, dark eyes couldn't deceive him. She was a demon and completely unashamed of it. America had discovered this not even an hour after she was born. As soon as America set her down with Delaware and Pennsylvania, New Jersey was screaming and waving her pudgy little fists at her big sisters.

"Elsje Jones," America said calmly but firmly.

New Jersey stopped her noise and looked up at him. A picture of innocence that didn't fool America for one moment. She was a feisty little scrapper and America knew she was going to be picking fights as soon as she could raise her own head without assistance.

Why America had written the name 'Elsje' instead of 'Elsie' on the birth certificate, as he'd intended, was something that puzzled him. Perhaps he was simply exhausted from giving birth to three children in the span of eleven days and had merely slipped when writing the 'i.' However, 'Elsje' just sort of fit for her.

New Jersey's eyes were starting to water, as though she was prepared to start crying if America didn't do something to entertain her. This prompted her sisters to start getting agitated, as well.

America wracked his brains for something to appease them. His eyes briefly alighted on a still-life painting on the nearby wall, depicting a cluster of roses. And a song he had heard while he attended a Christmas service years ago came to mind. It was a German hymn, old and beautiful and melodic. The people at the church, who were predominantly German immigrants (or else came from German-speaking countries), themselves, had sung it in its original words; and America had committed the piece to memory. He could have chosen an English song, he knew plenty of them; yet, somehow, that just didn't seem right in that moment. So, gathering some strength in his voice, America began to sing.

"Es ist ein Ros entsprungen,

aus einer Wurzel zart,

wie uns die Alten sungen,

von Jesse kam die Art

Und hat ein Blümlein bracht

mitten im kalten Winter,
wohl zu der halben Nacht."

His German was regionally accented, sounding more like the dialect of people in Germantown, Pennsylvania, which was composed of a variety of accents from the diverse Rhinelander groups that immigrated there, rather than something out of one of the German states. Although, his German had gotten something of a Hessian quality thanks to the couple thousand Hessian soldiers who had deserted the British forces during the Revolution thanks to Congress approving Mr. Franklin's idea of offering land to anyone willing to desert the British army.

New Jersey calmed steadily. Pennsylvania and Delaware also seemed to be lulled by the sweet notes and the vague sense of familiarity that came with the words. Eventually, the three girls drifted off to sleep, all cuddled up together in the warm shelter of their blankets.

America, upon seeing this, promptly passed out in sheer exhaustion and relief.

Having three fussy baby girls that Christmas was not easy. America was truly grateful that Congress was holding off on ratifying the next state until after the New Year.

America was also thankful that the girls grew more or less into toddlers over the season. They couldn't quite manage walking or talking, but they were clearly no longer newborns which made taking care of them a little bit easier. Not much easier, obviously, but somewhat.

Much of America's time that Christmas was spent sewing clothes for his children, and the children he knew would be coming along soon. America had had to learn how to mend clothing, thanks to his time on his own and in the military, but he was not particularly experienced in making clothing from scratch. Thankfully, a couple of his 'Founding Mothers' were more than willing to educate him. Mrs. Washington was exceedingly patient while tutoring America in sewing and other domestic arts which he, as a man, had never really received training in.

So, when Christmas day arrived, America had his three little cherubs decked out in ruffles, ribbons, and lace, all stitched by his own hands. New Jersey was not particularly keen on her frilly clothing and kept pulling at pieces of it which she didn't like.

January 2nd, 1788. Late afternoon.

America knew there was going to be trouble when he walked downstairs cradling little Georgia in his arms. While America loved his Founding Fathers, even he couldn't deny that many of them had worldviews that were not exactly…tolerant. Even some of the supposedly 'enlightened' ones among them still had deeply-ingrained prejudices that were not likely to go away in an instant.

He was right to be worried.

"This is my Georgia," America said, trying to keep up his proud and cheerful demeanor despite the anxiety he was feeling.

The room erupted into bickering. The Georgia delegates present were not exactly thrilled that their state's personification was, to put it in their words, a "negress." Some of the other delegates even went so far as to use Georgia's ethnicity as a means of insulting the people from the state, citing their initially Loyalist sympathies as the cause for Georgia being so 'different.' When America noticed his
little girl was getting more and more upset by all the shouting and arguing and the unkind words, he felt his anger spike. No one, no one, was permitted to insult his daughter, especially not for such a shallow reason.

"I said, 'this is my Georgia.'" His tone held no warmth. "Her human name is 'Belle Jones.' Are there any questions that will not have to result in me throwing someone out a window?"

The men all just stared for a moment, taking in the unusually stern tone of their nation's voice, and shook their heads. No one dared mention Georgia's appearance again, after that day, unless it was to say something purely complimentary.

There truly was something beautiful about the innocence of children in that they do not understand things like prejudice. The fact that Georgia looked different from them did not even seem to register to America's eldest girls. Pennsylvania just giggled and cuddled the new, squishy, little person that had joined the nursery. Delaware blinked at her in curiosity, but mostly retained her oddly mature, stoic gaze. New Jersey barely seemed to acknowledge anyone other than America.

With the children in their cradles, at long last, America let out a resigned sigh as he thought about the implications of everything he'd undergone recently. The changes that were now becoming a permanent fixture in his life and the views of the people responsible for everything were beginning to weigh heavily upon him.

"Not to worry, my boy," Mr. Franklin said, resting a reassuring hand on America's shoulder. "Everything will turn out fine, I am sure."

"Why did they have to make a big deal out of it?" America huffed. "It's like they thought there was something wrong with her." He leaned over the tiny, slumbering form of Georgia and idly stroked a little curl of her black hair.

"People often struggle when reconciling truth to their own perceptions."

"You didn't even bat an eye when I brought her in to show everyone."

"Well, if I may make so bold as to boast, I am a little more open-minded than many others among our acquaintance."

"That's very reassuring, Mr. Franklin," America said tiredly, "But I still have some concerns. Even overlooking what happened with the other delegates, what about the rest of the people? What about future leaders? What about when my children are grown and have seen such behavior repeated over and over? I might have stemmed the problem today, but there's no telling what will happen in the future."

"That's the thing about the future, my boy. It hasn't happened yet. We still have time to make things right."

America looked once again at Georgia, still sleeping peacefully in her cradle and oblivious to the vile poison that lingered in their land. He knew slavery would be a divisive presence amongst his people for years to come; he knew it was wrong, and there had been furious arguments during the Constitutional Convention regarding its continuation, but to eliminate it immediately and without considering the impact such a step would cause could prove to have dire consequences.

America was still just getting on his feet as a nation and many of his southern states depended on
slavery as part of their economy. In addition to that, sending people out into the world who had not
been educated and had no immediate means of supporting themselves would be tantamount to a
death sentence in many cases.

Still, he needed to curb the problem before it took permanent root. Congress would not even allow
the outlawing of participation in the international slave trade until 1808; however, nothing prevented
America from directing his children towards choosing for themselves to sever ties with the
international slave trade. The Three-Fifths Compromise was another issue which weighed heavily
upon his mind; that it meant enslaved people only counted as three-fifths of a person disgusted him,
but, at the same time, it restricted the power of the slave states and would limit incentive for future
states to permit slavery (had enslaved people counted the same as free in the census, slave states
would be allowed more representation and would, as a consequence, seek to expand the slave
population simply to gain even more power).

All of this still left America with a bitter taste in his mouth and a grim, ominous feeling as if he had
made some kind of deal with the Devil.

January 9th, 1788.

It wasn't that America wouldn't have been happy if all his children had been daughters, but he
couldn't fight the small tug of pride he felt as Connecticut, his eldest son, was laid in his arms. It was
slightly painful to look at his son, however. He knew, even then, that the boy would grow up
looking a lot like England; the eyebrows were pretty unforgettable, after all. The only real difference
was those big, blue eyes, just like America's own.

America must have been sleep-deprived, possibly even a bit drunk, when he filled out Connecticut's
birth certificate. Somehow, his addled mind had tapped into memories of his Puritan days and let that
influence his choice of name for his son.

Job-raked-out-of-the-ashes Jones.

Dear God, what was wrong with him? Yes, the Bible and the Christian faith were still very much an
important part of everyday life in America, but to tar a child with a name like that was just wrong.

While the ink had already dried on the paper in front of him, America knew he couldn't let his son
live with such an atrocious first name and decided to do what he did best. Improvise. Using the sliver
of blank space that came before the Puritan name, America wrote in the first sensible boy's name that
came to mind.

Thomas.

Thomas J. Jones.

It put him, first and foremost, in mind of Connecticut's founder, the Puritan leader Thomas Hooker. It
was a perfectly ordinary, sensible name, shared by many other prominent figures in America's life,
including Mr. Jefferson. Everyone who heard Connecticut's first name would just accept it.

And no one would ever have to know of America's horrendous error in judgement.
Connecticut was already acting a bit stuffy. He did not enjoy being moved about unless necessary and was woken from sleep at the slightest noise. However, America did notice that Connecticut started to make happy, bubbly noises when he heard America humming the tune of Yankee Doodle.

He was a bit of a demanding child, too, and did not like sharing his father's attention, which put him a bit at-odds with his older sisters. America was slightly worried about the behavior pattern and how it mirrored England. When he had sensed America slipping away, England had tried to cling to America and prevent him from interacting with others; it was not something America had any desire to see in any of his children.

Still, he couldn't exactly deny his son attention and affection. It just felt difficult, at times, to be strict with him, or any of the children. America was not a stern person, by nature, and he did adore his children.

And he would be there for his children. He would never leave them to fend for themselves, alone and afraid in a big house with no one there for them when they needed comfort, reassurance, and kindness. Already, his eldest children had learned to crawl and toddle about, escaping from their cradles in the night to clamber into bed with their father. How could America turn them away when they looked at him with those wide, pleading eyes?

February 6th, 1788.

If America had thought the human name he gave to Connecticut was dreadful, it was nothing compared to the one he'd saddled his second son with. Poor Massachusetts became the victim of a second wave of Puritanism as his father had filled in his birth certificate with the unfortunate moniker: If-Christ-had-not-died-for-thee-thou-hadst-been-damned Jones.

Looking at Massachusetts, who just blinked up at his father with guileless blue-green eyes, sent a surge of guilt through America. His son would never forgive him for that name when he was old enough to understand how awful it was. There was just barely enough room on the paper for a very short first name to be tacked on. America knew there was only one name that was simple but powerful enough to make up for the abysmal middle name that his son would have to carry. It was a common name, but one carried by many brave and brilliant men.

John.

John I. Jones.

"Johnny Jones," America said.

Massachusetts just giggled happily and tried to grab his father's nose.

America knew things could not stay the way they presently were. His family was growing and he couldn't keep living with Mr. Franklin. As much as he cared for the old man, some of Franklin's tendencies made America a little uncomfortable. Franklin's habit of taking "air baths," in which he would sit by an open window to read whilst wearing not so much as a stitch of clothing, was what immediately leapt to mind as a very good reason to move out.

But where was he to go?
Before the Revolution, he'd lived in a big, fancy house which England had had built for him. With luck, it was still standing and hadn't been burned to the ground. However, America honestly had no desire to live there again. It would have hurt too much to live in England's house with all the memories there, especially when the separation was still so fresh. If it was still there, America would remove his old belongings and sell off the property. He wasn't sure he could even look at the place without feeling the anger and sadness he still carried towards his former brother.

He needed a fresh start. A place he could call his own.

America glanced down at where his children were playing on the rug and a thought occurred to him. Each of them would need a place of their own, someday. It would be too much to ask his children to put up with each other all the time when they were grown, or to permanently reside in a state other than their own; besides, America needed to have a place he could stay in each state for when he had business there. A home in each state, for each state.

He began drafting letters. One was to commission a trustworthy group to investigate England's old house and retrieve whatever belongings remained. The others were inquiries into property and land. This could take a great deal of work, but America was certain he could get through it and secure a future for his family. It was the same dream of thousands who flocked to his shore; even now, he felt the feet of new citizens taking their first steps upon his shores. With the dawning of this new age for liberty and the founding of a nation not ruled by a European monarch, people seemed more eager than ever to come to him.

Time would tell what kind of a nation America would become, but he would do everything he could to make it right for his children. To lay a strong enough foundation for them to build upon, both in a figurative and literal sense.

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April 28th, 1788.

Maryland's birth was, perhaps, the easiest that America had had so far. She was just such a sweet, tiny, unassuming thing who seemed incapable of causing any sort of harm. With her chubby, pink cheeks and big, bright green eyes, she was doted upon and cooed over by everyone who saw her.

America wished that Mr. John Hanson was still alive. His first president of the Continental Congress would have been delighted to have had the chance to meet his personified state.

When America announced to Congress that he'd named his daughter Maryland "Mary-Anne Jones," there were quite a few annoyed groans at his display of unoriginality. Daniel Carroll, one of the few Roman Catholic Founding Fathers, demanded that his fellow delegates explain what fault they found with his state's human name, defying them to say something disparaging in his presence.

Maryland was a giggly, cheerful child. She constantly wanted to be cuddled and hugged, and many people were more than happy to oblige her. James McHenry even brought her a little wooden toy ship to play with one day and Daniel Jenifer brought her a bright red, silk ribbon which he tied in a pretty bow around her head (Maryland would continue to wear that ribbon every day).

He finally had a place he could call his.

It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do for the moment. With the Constitutional Convention
over, and delegates still arguing over whether to ratify or not (everyone was certain that Rhode Island, which hadn't even sent a single delegate to the convention, was a lost cause), America began to settle his family into the house he had purchased in New York City. It was a rather dingy place, not far from the docks, but it was what he could presently afford. America was, after all, an unemployed, single young man with several children in tow.

America was making preparations, though, to better provide for his growing family. It wasn't as though this was the frontier where survival was based on hunting, fishing, and such. Thankfully, America had help from people he would trust with his life. Hamilton, for instance, knew exactly how it felt to come up from nothing and gave America some excellent advice on financial investments… with some hints that perhaps establishing a national bank might make things move a little faster.

It was, perhaps, fitting that America should be living in a fairly impoverished state. After all, his nation was bankrupt as a result of the war. There were still debts left to be paid, especially to allies like France, to whom he owed his very freedom for all that he had done to support America in the war. Plus, the states were still printing their own currencies and taxing anything that came in from other states, so there were dramatic rivalries building up that kept the nation divided. That was probably the reason why his children started fighting with each other every few minutes, too.

It would be a long, hard march forward. But that was the thing about America. It was a place where everyone has a new start, a clean slate, and a chance to make it.

May 23, 1788.

He knew South Carolina was going to cause him trouble right from the start. A screaming, angry, little female version of England who appeared to become enraged whenever he showed the least bit of attention to her older siblings.

She appeared to hate being within the same room as her brothers, especially. She clung to Georgia like a lifeline and Georgia hugged her back. America wondered if it was because they were neighbors or if it was because they were two of the only southern states in existence. Maryland was also southern, but South Carolina reacted to her the same way she did the northern states.

America sighed in resignation as he sensed the future difficulties likely to arise if the north-south division wasn't bridged soon. The problems were only being egged on by arguments between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists; both those groups also seemed to think they could tell America, himself, how to raise his own children. The Federalists insisted that he have a tight hold on how things were run in his household and that he needed to be strict and authoritative if he hoped to ensure his states would be more manageable and behaved. The Anti-Federalists, on the other hand, told him that his children should be free to make their own choices and learn how to become self-reliant, rather than depending on America to make every decision for them.

Personally, America felt there was a valid argument on both sides. He certainly wanted to see his children grow to be responsible, well-behaved, and willing to support the family unit as a whole, but he also understood how awful it was to have someone enforcing their own rules without allowing anyone else a say. In each of his children's faces, however unique they were, he could clearly see himself and all the resentment he felt towards England and Parliament and King George III, only manifested in a new form. America would always be suspicious of too much government control, just as he distrusted too much control in the household; that being said, though, there needed to be something in place to keep the states from overstepping boundaries.
That was why they needed the Constitution.

America felt a new sense of determination in him as he signed South Carolina's birth certificate, her name reading: Jessamine Jones. He was going to make this work.

It had become a common occurrence for congressional meetings to find America sitting in his own section of Federal Hall, surrounded by a group of infant states. The children were...mostly well-behaved. The fact was, though, that they would get agitated when the delegates began to argue; this often led the states to start pinching each other, stealing each other's toys, pulling each other's hair, or, in New Jersey's case, biting anyone who got too close.

A few of the stuffier delegates tried to demand that the states be prohibited from the meetings until they were mature enough to not cause such disruptions. The fact that it was a Federalist who voiced the complaint led to a heated protest from the Anti-Federalist section about how that comment was a subtle insult towards states' rights, resulting in a squabble that only ended when the normally silent and steadfast Delaware began to cry.

The men all reacted the way men normally do to a crying little girl. They stopped shouting immediately and began trying to reassure her that everything was all right and 'Please, please, do not cry! We were only acting in jest!' John Dickinson, who had a couple little girls of his own back home, had scooped Delaware up into his arms and began gently rocking her back and forth to calm her down, whilst shooting a discreet glare at the perpetrators of the dispute that had upset his state.

Mostly, though, America used the time he brought his children into congressional meetings to begin teaching them. On days when there wasn't much on the agenda, the delegates also contributed to the education and edification of the young states.

Unbeknownst to America, Washington had called a few secret congressional meetings. He had convinced the other delegates that no word of the existence of the states' personifications could leave the country. That their nation, himself, would likely have to engage in discourse with foreign nations was worry enough to the veteran Commander-In-Chief, as he did not trust the influence that foreign entities would have on America, but the chance that other nations might attempt to use America's states against him was a terrifying possibility. Washington warned Congress that the only way America could be destroyed was from within, and the existence of the states made that an even more palpable danger.

June 21st, 1788.

It was a sweltering summer day. America had had to wrestle with his children to get them to wear appropriate clothes, simply because the scratchy cotton garments were horribly uncomfortable in the heat of the day. They wouldn't be out and about for very long, however. America had been in the middle of grocery shopping when someone came to tell him that the New Hampshire delegates had decided to attend the congressional meeting. America knew there was only one thing that would bring them there, now.

They were going to sign the Constitution.

America wrapped up his shopping as fast as he could and herded his children back in the direction of
the house. After eight kids, he now knew to be prepared for what was assuredly going to happen. He could feel the seconds ticking by as he rushed through the house, getting things ready for the next arrival. America could've sworn he felt the scratching of the quill pen on paper as Nicholas Gilman and John Langdon signed their names to the document.

Nine states. That was what it took to make something into law. A bill could only pass if there was a nine-thirteenths majority.

New Hampshire had just made the United States Constitution a reality.

It was well past noon when America felt the small New England state beating against his skull, demanding admittance to his family. America fell back onto his bed, clutching at his head as it throbbed sharply. He thought he heard the sound of gunfire, at one point.

When he came to, America found the wrinkled, bloody, crying form of a baby beside him, once again. Thin, red curls clung to the top of her head and blue eyes glared fiercely up at him. America, with shaking hands, lifted New Hampshire into his arms.

He felt stronger now. As tired and shaken as he was from delivering another child, he felt as if there was more stability in him.

After he had cleaned the baby, wrapped her in a blanket, and set her in the cradle, America sat down at his desk to fill out her birth certificate. He’d decided to purchase a stack of them, just as a precaution. He glanced down at the little figure in the cradle – she was still awake and watching him intensely – and found that something about her reminded him of another strong-willed young woman.

A mess of ginger curls, bright green eyes, thick eyebrows, and a fearsome temper. Southern Ireland, as she was called (one day destined to become the Republic of Ireland), had frequently sneaked over to the colonies as America was growing up. Indeed, he saw her and Northern Ireland far more often than he did England. He remembered the times she would show up, out of the blue, to look after him, tell him stories, cook for him, and sing in her beautiful language as she played on her beloved old harp.

Aideen Jones, was what America wrote on the certificate. Southern Ireland had once told him about what some of her people's names meant. 'Aideen' meant 'Little Fire,' if he remembered correctly. That was what New Hampshire made him think of. A little fire that would ignite a blaze, a blaze that would destroy the old society and create something new.

Just as the Constitution would replace the Articles of Confederation, now that New Hampshire had made it possible.

June 25th, 1788

At Virginia's birth, America honestly wasn't surprised to find so many people waiting at his door to ask after him and his new child. Washington stood at the head of the crowd. While the man gave nothing away in his expression, America knew that he was more eager than anyone to see his home state personified. America invited his guests in for coffee (not tea, never tea again) and went to retrieve his family's newest addition.

Rebecca Jones. He'd known from the first what he would name Virginia. Some had expected him to name her 'Elizabeth,' after the queen for whom she was founded. But America wanted as much
distance between himself and England's monarchy as possible. Instead of naming her for a person who'd never even set foot on his lands, America named Virginia in honor of one of her greatest heroines. Rebecca Rolfe, born as "Matoaka" and known more commonly by her nickname, "Pocahontas."

There were hearty exclamations from the proud Virginia delegates as to the bright future of an unquestionably brilliant and talented child. That little Virginia's sole interest at that moment was trying to suck on her own toes mattered nothing to the certainty of the Virginian men in the room that their state was destined to be a leader among all the states. After all, she was home to numerous exceptionally talented minds and charismatic personalities; to doubt her future status was laughable.

With so much praise being heaped upon her just for existing, America was worried his little girl would get a swelled head and an inflated ego. Her cold grey eyes seemed to regard her surroundings with considerable disdain and America had sensed, very early on, that he would not be able to keep her in the north indefinitely (something just told him that she absolutely hated being in New York and would never be happy until she was taken south).

America decided to step up on finding some decent land on which to build his next home.

July 26th, 1788

Due to New York City being his current place of residence, news of the state's birth spread rapidly throughout the area. Not only the politicians, but crowds of ordinary, working-class people showed up to demonstrate their support for their homeland. America was not really surprised. New Yorkers wore their state identity like they did a favorite hat; meaning they showed it off proudly and expected people to take note of it.

The state, himself, was hungry for recognition from the moment he entered the world.

Markus Alexander Jones.

America had selected the first name simply because he liked it and thought it suited his son well. New York's middle name, however, was a very direct homage to someone America respected and trusted enormously. America never thought that someone as loquacious as Hamilton could be rendered speechless, or look so vulnerable, when America informed him of it.

Hamilton would never admit it, America knew, but having the state of New York carry his name (even if not as a first name) moved him deeply. After all, Hamilton had not been born in New York, or any of the other Thirteen Colonies for that matter; he'd been an illegitimate orphan immigrant without a penny to his name when he first set foot on America's shores. To America, though, that was exactly why he felt Alexander Hamilton deserved to be remembered; he was the perfect example of the American Dream made reality, a man who came from nothing who made his own way in the world and who was currently helping America become the great nation he was destined to be.

Even in those days, America knew he would be forever indebted to Alexander Hamilton. He would remember him, even if history and the American people forgot him. And he would make certain that New York, Markus Alexander Jones, would know all about his human namesake.
In June of 1789, when John Adams finally returned home to the U.S., grumbling all the while about "arrogant, selfish Europeans" and "snobbish English courtiers" to his weary but exceptionally patient wife, he was not expecting to be met by a rather nervous Alexander Hamilton. When he asked his colleague (though he would never classify him as a "friend" and would gladly dismiss him should he ever get the chance) what was troubling him, Hamilton tried to brush him off. Adams suspected right away that the cause of Hamilton's anxiety lay with a certain personified nation of theirs, as Hamilton only ever lost his usual swagger when something serious was going on with America.

"Hamilton, is America all right?" he pressed.

Hamilton made a choking noise in his throat and refused to meet his gaze.

"You'll see," he said.

Adams narrowed his eyes. Abigail patted his arm reassuringly and the two of them followed Hamilton as he led them to a waiting coach.

The journey through bustling New York City took them quite some time. And throughout the duration, Adams was stewing in his curiosity. He was certain, now, that America had done something big while he was gone.

They arrived at a simple, slightly shabby home of brown brick not far from the city docks. Adams had never visited the place before, and he was certain that it wasn't Hamilton's residence. Hamilton led them to the front door and knocked. The door was flung open and there stood the beaming, if somewhat tired-looking, figure of the United States of America.

"Mr. Adams, Mrs. Adams, you're back!" America said gleefully. "I've missed you!"

"Hello, Alfred dear," said Abigail with a warm, motherly smile. "I hope you've been well while we were gone."

"I've been doing great! Things couldn't be better!"

There was a sudden crash from inside the house.

"Uh, just ignore that," America said, nervously rubbing the back of his neck. "Please, c'mon in."

Hamilton looked like he couldn't decide between wanting to die and wanting to burst out laughing. Adams quirked one brow up as he watched his nation with suspicion.

"Yes, Mr. Adams," Hamilton said. "There may have been something I forgot to mention in the message I sent to you."

The sounds of screaming and crying emanated from within the house. America turned around sharply and bolted back inside. The three guests followed after him. Mr. and Mrs. Adams both froze in shock as they took in the sight before them. Eleven little children, most barely infants, were wreaking untold havoc inside the house.

"New Jersey, get down from there!" America shouted. "Massachusetts, don't dump that! That's not tea, it's coffee! Pennsylvania, you're suffocating Delaware!"

Abigail was thankful for her good reflexes as she caught her husband when he fell back in a dead faint.

"I can only imagine how dear Mr. Jefferson will react to this when he returns," she said.
November 21st, 1789

He could tell she was a sly one from the moment he saw her. She wasn't the little hellion that her sister South Carolina was, but America knew there was something sharp and determined about North Carolina. Her face as pink and pretty as a rose blossom didn't deceive him; America had heard the war cries of her mountain men when they crushed their opponents at King's Mountain and the Battle of the Cowpens, and only a fool would ignore the impact that such achievements by her people would have on the state, herself.

Katherine Jones, as he named her, was destined for a proud military legacy. By land, by sea, perhaps, one day, even by air, America knew she could fight her battles in any field she chose.

For now, though, she was a tiny, chubby, little thing swathed in ruffles who slept a considerable amount, but who would wail at the top of her lungs at odd hours as if she knew she was catching her father off-guard when she did so. As soon as America came in to try and calm her down, she would smile back at him, a picture of perfect childish innocence.

America thought he'd have to use a crowbar to detach Jefferson from the suffocating hug he'd enveloped several of the southern states in. Honestly, though, he could hardly fault the man for being so clingy upon finally meeting the states, now that he'd returned from his duties as Minister to France. He was a man who loved easily and cared deeply, and he'd suffered several very personal losses within the last few years. The state he was most reluctant to release from his embrace was, unsurprisingly, Virginia; like Washington, Jefferson was a man who loved his home state about on a par with the nation as a whole.

"What else have I missed in the course of my absence?" Jefferson asked, after finally relinquishing his hold on Virginia.

America went on to explain a few of the issues that Congress was presently discussing, as well as some of the ideas presented by Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists to resolve the problems. Jefferson became very contemplative as America spoke, his brow furrowing and his expression becoming troubled.

America continued to prattle on, unaware of the dissension he was sowing. While America, himself, was willing to listen to both sides on arguments, he often forgot that humans tend to lean more towards one side or the other. In his attempt to update one of his long-absent Founding Fathers, America was unintentionally contributing to the growing division in the political sphere. Although Jefferson would not immediately be at-odds with Hamilton and the Federalists, the lines had already been drawn and it would become rapidly apparent which side the men in question stood on.

It was a divide which would outlive the Founding Fathers for a considerable portion of American history.

May 29th, 1790

America honestly thought he'd never see this day.
Everyone had told him Rhode Island was a lost cause and that the people would never accept the Constitution; some had even gone so far as to nickname the place "Rogue's" Island. For some time, America had begun to wonder if perhaps Rhode Island would remain forever cut off from the rest of the country, maybe even become some kind of microstate with a separate government from his.

But, now, America held the tiny boy in his arms. Coppery curls clung to his face and eyes of a bright teal green simmered with an air of defiance.

*Benjamin Canonicus Jones.*

He'd chosen his son's first name in honor of Colonel Benjamin Church, the ranger who defended New England during King Philip's War and Queen Anne's War and who became founder of a town in Rhode Island where he now lay buried. While many had forgotten the exploits of the man, or else confused him with his great-grandson, Dr. Benjamin Church, who had been ousted as a spy and driven from America's lands, America never forgot the colonel's daring deeds nor his code for effective military tactics.

At least, that was part of the reason for Rhode Island's first name. Privately, he'd chosen the name 'Benjamin' to honor Mr. Franklin, who had passed away only a month before. The grief of that loss still weighed heavily on America, who knew there would never be another man quite like Benjamin Franklin.

Rhode Island's middle name was in honor of perhaps one of the most important figures in the state's founding: Chief Canonicus of the Narragansett. Without him, Roger Williams and the dissenters who had fled the Massachusetts Bay Colony would likely not have survived. He had been the one to grant them the land upon which Providence was built and fought fiercely to protect his colonial allies, even compelling his people to side with the British during the Pequot War.

He hoped Rhode Island would learn from the examples set by his namesakes. For the last few years, the place had been a consummate source of difficulty. Not only had the people refused to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, but they had persisted in printing their own – basically worthless – currency and forcing all merchants to accept it, levying outrageous duties on imports, and getting rid of anyone in a position of power who challenged their ridiculous actions. But everything had changed…by a narrow two votes (the closest of all votes to ratify the Constitution).

"Now you're finally home," America said as he cradled his son.

Rhode Island looked up at him with a pouty face.

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America was sent out on a surveying mission from Congress. They had given him their assurances that the states would be looked after and that he needed some time away to collect his thoughts. America appreciated the sentiment. As much as he loved his children, having thirteen of them all at once was making life incredibly stressful. It was pleasant to be able to get away for a brief bit of time to himself, even if it did involve work.

He was in the Vermont region. Vermont was an unusual place. The people there claimed to be their own republic, though were open to the possibility of joining the United States, but their land was being claimed by both New York and New Hampshire. It was America's responsibility to settle the dispute, once and for all. When he returned to Congress, he was expected to give an answer as to whether or not Vermont should become its own state.
America took a seat beneath a tall maple tree. He looked out beyond him and saw the sweeping green land and proud mountains which had contributed to the name its original French settlers had given it. It was a beautiful place and he felt the connection to the land keenly. He knew it was his, but was it just a part of one of his children or a new child he had yet to see?

"I've been waiting for you, Monsieur," a voice said beside him.

America was startled by the intrusion and bolted to his feet. Sitting there on the grass, next to where he had just been, was a young boy. The boy had long, yellow-blonde hair and bright green eyes. He was dressed in green, too, and also wore a child-sized tricorn hat. He looked strangely tired, worn, and a little sickly and pale.

"I hope I did not offend, Monsieur Amérique," the boy continued in his strange French dialect. "But I have been anticipating your arrival for some time. Please, do sit down, again. We may converse more easily, that way."

America cautiously sat back down, watching the boy with a suspicious gaze. How did the boy know who he was?

"I do not suppose you remember the last time we met," the boy continued.

"Have we met before?"

"Ah, you do not remember, then. Do you remember, though, that night you captured Fort Ticonderoga?"

"Yeah, that I remember. Ethan Allen brought his Green Mountain Boys to help Benedict Ar—to help a colonel in my army and me to take the fort."

"And what of the men who accompanied you? Their names and faces, do you recall?"

America paused in thought for a moment, thinking through those brave few men who had fought for him. He had committed names and faces from every battle to memory, so that their efforts and sacrifice would not be forgotten even if the history books did not preserve their deeds for posterity.

"What is your name?" America asked.

"I have gone by the name 'Jacques' for some time," the boy replied. Now he knew. A nervous little drummer boy caught up amidst the crowd of tough, seasoned men, looking completely out of his depth. He recalled how Ethan Allen had been exceedingly protective of the child, making sure he was kept out of direct fire but still insisting on keeping him with the Green Mountain Boys.

'Jacques' was smiling now. It was a sad, distant kind of smile.

"You surely must know me now, Monsieur," he said. "It has been my honor to serve my nation, however brief that time has been."

"Vermont," America said, his voice catching on that word as it finally clicked who and what 'Jacques' really was. "You're not…you're not going to die, are you?"

"Death is a strange notion for entities such as we, non? I would not say I am 'dying'; simply put, I am transitioning." Vermont turned and looked at him with those luminous green eyes and America felt his heart breaking for the tiny republic. "Perhaps this was my destiny from the beginning. I was
never going to be strong enough to make it alone. I never \textit{wanted} to be alone. I always wanted to belong to a family. To have parents and siblings like the human children."

His expression became wistful and, yet, hopeful.

"I would be proud to call you 'Father,' \textit{Monsieur Amérique}," he said. "If you would permit me such presumption."

"Of course I would welcome you as a son," America said, his eyes filling with tears as he saw the lines around Vermont start to blur.

"We will be seeing each other soon, then, \textit{Papa}. I…I will likely not remember you when we meet once more, so do not forget me."

The weight of Vermont's words finally settled on America. The Vermont Republic had to die, but it was America's decision which would determine if he could come back as a state. He would never be fully himself again, but he could still survive as the fourteenth state.

"I will remember you, Jacques," America said.

Vermont gave him a watery smile.

"I will be made new when I return," he said. "So I will need a new name. I wish to be called 'Ethan,' if it is not too much trouble. To honor one of my bravest Patriots."

"Ethan," America repeated the name as if it were a promise.

America and Vermont Republic sat together, watching the sun slowly set in the distance, in silence. Vermont made no cry or sound of pain as he dissolved into nothing but fractals of light. As quiet as it was, there was something terrible and heartbreaking about it; America had never seen a nation die before, and he hoped he never had to again.

\underline{March 4th, 1791}

\textit{Ethan Jones}, America wrote on the certificate with his right hand while his left arm cradled a green-eyed, yellow-haired newborn. Vermont was a quiet baby, barely even crying when he was born. It was unnerving for America.

The Thirteen all toddled into the room and surrounded the cradle that held their newest brother. Pennsylvania began prattling in rapid-fire child-talk about the tiny newborn boy. Although Delaware was the eldest, Pennsylvania had been the first to learn how to speak; or, at least, the first to voice her ability to speak.

New York scrunched up his nose, as if he saw something unpleasant, and began poking Vermont. Vermont began to get teary-eyed, which prompted New Hampshire, in a surge of protectiveness, to smack New York with her little fist. This began a chain reaction of fighting and crying which America frantically tried to put an end to.

After a good hour of wrestling with his swarm of children, everyone was tired out to the point of exhaustion. America had collapsed in his chair in the nursery with several of the younger states cuddled up against him while the rest had curled up on cushions, mostly snuggled up next to whatever siblings they could stand to be near.
The only one who wasn't asleep was Vermont, who turned his bright eyes to look up at his sleeping father and smiled knowingly to himself.

He couldn't keep doing this alone.

He'd never get back the weeks of sleepless nights or the sheer, mind-numbing exhaustion that came from raising a horde of willful, fiercely determined, and mostly hard-headed babies. He was so tired. Perhaps that was why there were so many national issues being left unattended; if America couldn't even get his states in order, what hope did he have for keeping his nation in check?

What he needed was experience from someone like himself. As much as he loved his people, he doubted anyone would know how to raise children like his states. If the fact that there were so many of them all at once and within the same age range weren't enough, there was the fact that they would often wake up in the middle of the night, screaming about horrible things which had happened in their lands, mostly events from the Revolution. He still remembered how New York had flung himself into America's arms, tears streaming down his face as he had woken from memories of when New York City had caught fire (America still suspected the fire had not been an accident) or when Virginia had recollected the considerably earlier Starving Times at Jamestown and had started shoving food into her mouth as fast as she could get her hands on it, as if she were trying to stave off inevitable crippling hunger.

America cursed himself for being unable to do anything. He'd lived through the same events and had never expected to fear that his children would have to endure the same horrible memories.

But who could he turn to for something like this? The only other person he'd really thought he could look to for advice on being a nation was England, whom he doubted he would ever speak to again, or else England's siblings, who'd been likewise barred from speaking to America by England. America couldn't turn to Canada for advice, as Canada was both as inexperienced as he was and was standing by his decision to remain loyal to England (especially considering how many of America's Loyalist citizens had chosen to flee to Canada in the wake of America's independence).

There was no one else like him that could…no, there were people like him. People who went mostly unseen but were still very much alive and present.

America sat in the windowsill and stared out at the bustling New York City street outside. This land, before it had been built up by colonists, had once been home to others, many different nations not bound to specific territorial lines. His memories of his older brothers and sisters were vague but still present. In the Revolution, two of his sisters, Oneida and Tuscarora, had stood steadfastly by his side in his fight with England.

They'd reunited at Valley Forge. America had been in a terrible way; worn out, starving, freezing cold, feeling the ravages of illness which decimated his troops…but then, they had appeared. Led by one of Oneida's people, a woman named "Polly Cooper," his sisters had found him half-dead while standing by on watch duty. Oneida and Tuscarora had grabbed him into an embrace that warmed him more than any fire could; they'd wrapped him in a homespun blanket, demanded he lie down and rest, and given him a set of hand-stitched buckskin boots for his bare feet – as America, like most of his men, did not even have shoes and was about to lose his toes to frostbite. While Oneida and Tuscarora had not, initially, wanted to get involved in America's Revolution, the fact that the other Iroquois had chosen to side with England decided for them that they could not sit idly by.

Would they help him, now? How would they react to the states? Why hadn't he gone to tell them
about his situation sooner?

All he knew was that he had to take another chance. America might be impetuous, but he would rather try and fail than do nothing at all.

The house was peaceful for the first time since he'd moved in.

The states were tucked up in bed, clean and well-fed and happy. Baby Vermont was dozing in his father's arms as America sat by the fireplace with his sisters. Oneida was an elegant woman, very poised and graceful in her bearing; while she tended to favor the dress of the colonial women, she had added adjustments to her attire to make it more suited to her particular style and reflected elements of who she had been and still was as a tribe. Tuscarora, in contrast, made no concessions to European-American expectations of garb; she still wore old-fashioned buckskins, necklaces made from traditional materials like shells and carved animal bone (as opposed to Oneida, who had taken to using glass beads), and kept a flint knife tucked into her belt; were her clothes not disquieting enough for the stiff sensibilities of the European-American society, the nasty scar down the left side of her face and the small marks indicating she had suffered through smallpox at one point would definitely keep unwanted company from trying to engage her in conversation.

"You should have come to us the instant this happened, Little Star," Oneida said. "Why must you always insist on doing everything alone?"

"You've both already done so much for me," said America. "Suffered more than your fair share for it, too."

"Don't be stupid," Tuscarora said sharply, though there was no real heat to her tone. "If I can charge screaming into battle with the odds stacked completely against me for your sake, I can spare some time to deal with a few ankle-biting infants."

America was about to say something, but Tuscarora cut him off.

"And don't start any ridiculous stammering," she said. "You are our brother, our family. But you are also a nation of your own, now. It is your responsibility to serve your people as Mother did before you and it is the responsibility of your people to look after you. Oneida and I may be nations, but our existence depends on yours."

"But, I'm just-"

"So help me, if you dare say that you are just the United States, I will be forced to strike you. You did not simply pop into the world when that Jefferson man wrote that Declaration. You existed long before these colonies were built and Mother knew you and Kanata were destined to take her place. You are the whole of this land, and that includes all its people."

"She is right," said Oneida. "We are as much a part of you as anyone else. When you suffer, all of us suffer. We...we just want to help you, however we can."

America could see the trace of tears in Oneida's eyes and, after setting Vermont down in his little wooden cradle, knelt in front of Oneida and took her hands in his.

"I am so sorry, Oneida," he said.

"Don't-don't you apologize, Little Star," Oneida said sadly. "You were taken from us. You were
made to forget us, even compelled to hate us.” She shot forward and wrapped her arms around America, who hugged her back. "I just want us to be a family once again. I know things can never be as they were before, but please don't forget us."

Tuscarora, normally stern and solemn, allowed herself to also sink to the floor to wrap her arms around her brother and sister, tears coming to her own eyes.

"I will do everything I can to fix what's happened," America said. "I promise."

"Don't make such promises lightly," said Tuscarora, a note of bitterness in her voice. "Our family was never fully whole to begin with and many of the whites, and even some of our own kin, will try to steer you away from such a mission. Some things cannot be fixed."

"I refuse to believe that. No matter what it takes, I will never stop fighting for my family."

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_June 1st, 1792_

It had amazed America when Virginia had come into his study one day, holding a paper in her hands which declared her recognition of a new state. The document was very childish, with ink smudges and a number of spelling and grammatical errors, but it made a very firm point, though the wording held a strong note of condescension, as if Virginia was making an enormous sacrifice and being exceptionally generous in granting her permission for Kentucky to separate from her and become an independent state.

Several days after Virginia had done that, a message arrived from Kentucky carrying the state's first constitution, pending approval from Congress. That had been back in April.

When Congress finally granted its approval, America was jolted by a sudden pounding in his head. The states had toddled, waddled, and crawled into their father's bedroom when they heard him cry out and watched in concern as he lay in his bed, clutching at his skull as the familiar sensation ripped through it. When the fit had passed, America turned to find the crying and bloody newborn state lying beside him. Sitting up, America picked up his newest son and cradled him in his arms.

The states converged around the two, each trying to get a good look at their new brother. New Hampshire helped Vermont to his feet (as he was the only one who had yet to learn to walk), Rhode Island kept bouncing up and down behind his older siblings as he wasn't tall enough to get a good look, and Pennsylvania had already begun climbing up onto the bed to lean in really close to stare at the baby.

"Everyone, this is your new brother," said America. "Kentucky."

Virginia wrinkled her nose as she looked at the state who had once been no more than a piece of territory to the west of her.

"He's almost as ugly as the Northies," she said with her normal level of tact.

The northern states rounded on her with sharp glares. New York and Rhode Island even chimed in with some very childish insults in response.

"What are we gonna name him, Papa?" said Maryland, who was hugging her father's leg and smiling up at him and the baby.
America went through his memories of the many brave people who had helped bring Kentucky into being, exploring the land and starting settlements and daring to step out into a place hitherto unknown to European colonists. One man's name leapt immediately to mind. A man who was a legend in his own lifetime and still causing a stir with his tales of adventure across the Appalachians. A frontiersman known as 'Daniel Boone.'

"Daniel," America told his children. "His name is 'Daniel Jones.'"

It had taken a long time, but America had finally secured places for each of his states to have their own homes. Now that he was more financially stable, thanks to the tireless work of Mr. Hamilton in resolving the national debt, he could begin drawing up plans for the houses he would build. He also made sure to ask his children for input into how they wanted their houses to look (after all, these would be for their benefit and it was only right that they should have a say).

The southern states wanted plantations, except for Maryland who wanted a house in Baltimore. Most of the northern states also wanted residences which were near to their preferred cities, if not in the hearts of said cities. The exceptions were New Hampshire and Vermont, who wanted quiet, secluded places out in the mountains. New York insisted on keeping the house America had already purchased in New York City, stating very assuredly that he could always make changes when he was older.

His children frequently came to him with crude, childish drawings of things they wanted for their homes. Virginia had really been taken with Mr. Jefferson's ideas of a Classical revival and included lots of Grecian columns and statues in her designs, as well as insisting on a big library. North Carolina was happy with a more rustic look while South Carolina kept trying to make her designs more and more elaborate before just scribbling a bunch of pictures of palmettos. Georgia's design was very open, bright, and airy with lots of space for gardens and orchards. Massachusetts's house design stringently adhered to the traditional colonial model with few of the frills that later, more decadent homes possessed. Connecticut, in contrast, wanted his home to be a large and imposing estate, which he said he wanted to make visitors "feel small and insignificant." Pennsylvania alternated between wanting a fancy city home or a simple, traditional farm estate and asked if he could come back to her when she'd made a more definitive decision.

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**June 1st, 1796**

*Susanna Jones.*

A bubbly little thing with a light tuft of blonde hair on her head and pretty blue-grey eyes that shone happily up at her father and a smile as rich and bright as sunshine. Her creation was a narrow thing, Congress had made a very close vote to admit the new state, and both the Carolinas already didn't like her very much.

The family was preparing to head out when she was born. They had packed up a few essential belongings and crowded into a large coach which America had built himself for his family to be able to move about more effectively. So, cradling his newborn daughter, whom he'd hastily cleaned up and wrapped in fresh blankets, America led the states single-file into the coach and directed the driver to set off. He was still tired and sore from the birth of the new state of Tennessee, but his departure could be delayed no longer.

The other states crowded at the windows or bounced in their seats as the coach rumbled along the rough and dusty road as they journeyed southward. Tennessee just yawned and went to sleep.
America was staying at Mount Vernon with President Washington. They had both decided to survey the progress being made on the construction of the new capital on the banks of the Potomac River. America had also come south to see how his own properties were coming along now that he had more time and resources to devote to construction.

President Washington and Mrs. Washington were more than happy to welcome America and the states into their home. The presidential couple watched on fondly as the states chased each other around the grounds of Mount Vernon in a display of typical childish exuberance. For Washington, especially, it was a happy reprieve from the troubles which had been brewing even as the nation pushed forward towards prosperity.

America knew perfectly well what was on his president's mind. The problems coming from the outside, such as the uncertain ties to Britain and the deteriorating relationship America had with his former allies, France and Spain, were worry enough, but the internal matters were even more troubling. Hamilton and Jefferson's quarrel had boiled over to the point that Jefferson had resigned in fury, which had angered Washington so much that he refused to ever speak with Jefferson again. Furthermore, Hamilton had resigned from the post of Secretary of the Treasury following the Whiskey Rebellion, as he felt that Congress was not interested in fixing the remaining issues with the financial situation.

"You know, sir, you should start thinking about planning for your next presidential campaign," America said to Washington with a bright smile. "Not that there's any doubt you would win in a landslide, again."

Washington gave a small, tired smile back to America.

"I think you should give more consideration to Mr. Adams's bid for the presidency," he said. "After all, I should rather him succeed me to the office than Jefferson."

America blinked at his president in surprise.

"What do you mean, sir?"

Washington looked out at the open land where the states were running about freely, shrieking in delight as they continued to play whatever game it was they had come up with. For the first time, America noticed the lines in his president's face and realized the white in his hair was no longer the result of the powder he used to put in it.

"As Scripture says, 'Everyone shall sit under his own vine and fig tree,'" Washington said. "I think it is time I do so, myself."

"But…sir…" America's eyes had begun to tear up. He couldn't think of what more he could say to his president without sounding selfish or needy.

"I know, my boy. But I have every confidence in you. I am only one man, a flawed man at that, but you are something much larger and greater than I. I know you shall be all right without me when the time comes, so long as you stand by the principles upon which you were founded and do not shirk your moral responsibilities. You have always believed in me, America, and I believe in you."
"Though in reviewing the incidents of my Administration I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend. I shall also carry with me the hope that my country will never cease to view them with indulgence, and that, after forty-five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion, as myself must soon be to the mansions of rest."

America set the newspaper down on the table and poured himself another cup of coffee. He took in the unusually quiet scene before him of his children sitting sullen and silent at their breakfast. They hadn't taken the news that Washington wouldn't be returning to office very well. Virginia had actually burst into tears and locked herself in the nursery.

"Everything will be fine," America told the states. "I promise."

He was met by eerily identical expressions of incredulity from every quarter. As different as each of his children were, they were united in at least one belief…that being that there would never be a president like George Washington ever again.

None of the states said anything. Some poked idly at their food while others just stared absently. America couldn't remember being this melancholic or fearful of the future when he was as young as they were; in fact, he tended to avoid such moods as it was. For America, the future was bright and full of possibilities, but his children were having a difficult time seeing beyond the present.

March 1st, 1803

A great deal of time had passed since that night in December of 1787 when he held his firstborn child, Delaware. It was a different time, now. It had been three years since the dawning of the new century and America was more certain of his destiny now than he'd ever been. He'd won his Revolution, he'd made it through that dreary, tumultuous push to stability in his early years as an independent republic, he'd faced the rising storm of partisan politics, he'd lost several of his greatest founders (including George Washington, who had passed away only a couple weeks before the new century began), he'd seen whatever bonds of friendship he'd had with France rapidly disintegrate as they entered into an unofficial maritime conflict, and throughout it all he'd been raising a swarm of children mostly on his own (though Oneida and Tuscarora made frequent visits since America reunited with them) with a fair amount of success.

Today, his family welcomed their newest addition.

Ohio.

Gottfried Jones.

He'd heard the name while speaking with some of his German-American citizens. It meant something to the effect of 'God's peace.' His youngest son was certainly a peaceful child, very sweet and quiet and not demanding. He'd entered the union and the family with little fuss. He was a healthy, whole, and happy child whose prospects seemed immeasurably bright, considering how rapidly his land was developed and the steady growth of his population.
Pennsylvania, who had decided early on that she had no interest in playing with dollies as new babies were much more fun, picked her tiny, squishy brother out of her father's hands and began to cuddle with him.

"Anyone hurts my new *bruder* and I will destroy them," she said with a solemn resolve.

America chuckled and ruffled Pennsylvania's hair.

"I don't doubt it," he said. "I hope you'll be as protective when you get your next little brother or sister."

"Are we gonna have more siblin's soon, Pa?" said North Carolina, tilting her head and looking at him curiously.

"Well, I don't want to spoil anything, but we're going to have a lot of new space to move into in a couple of months. After that, who knows what new surprises we'll have?"

The family was decked in their Sunday best as they took their places. America was seated, dressed in a blue coat with a white cotton shirt, breeches, and cravat and his best, freshly-polished shoes. Little Ohio was settled on his father's lap, dressed in a white child's frock. The girls each wore a lacy, white dress and had tucked their hair into child-sized bonnets; their outfits were only distinguished by the fact that each girl had differently-colored ribbons on her outfit. The boys all wore their 'skeleton suits' (smaller versions of adult men's wear, designed for children and with frillier adornments than what one would find on the clothes of a grown man), each one in a distinctive color.

The children positioned themselves around their father, some standing beside America and some sitting on the floor at America's feet.

The artist set the blank canvas on his easel, picked up his paint palette, and set to work. It would be a commemorative painting, showing America's family as it was at that period in history. He'd had other portraits of the family done; there was one of him and the Thirteen, one of him and just his girls, one of him and just his boys, one of him with his states and with his sisters, and a few other random arrangements. America hoped there would be an easier way to get portraits done in the future; hiring someone to paint them each time was tiring and expensive, and it didn't really capture them in personal moments as the scenes were staged.

America sat upright and remained as still as he could, even as he felt cramps start to set in. If he could keep scenes like this forever, it would be worth the bit of discomfort he felt in the hours sitting for the paintings. After all, recording simple moments like this was vitally important to him...especially as change was just around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Connecticut's and Massachusetts's middle names are actual Puritan names that people really named their children. Patrick Henry, the author of the famous "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech, was invited to the Constitutional Convention but refused, stating that he "smelled a rat" in Philadelphia, because he had zero trust in the Constitution and believed it was going
to be nothing more than a tool to limit state rights.

I think, of all the Founding Fathers, Washington would've been the most protective of and devoted to the states. My headcanon is that, because Washington is nicknamed "Father of the Country," he had a father-son kind of bond with America (as he did with Hamilton and Lafayette), especially considering the fact that Washington had no actual children of his own, which was, according to some sources, one of the deepest disappointments in his life. So, since America is a kind of adoptive son to Washington, Washington regards the states like his grandchildren.

During the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin came up with the idea to convince the Hessian mercenaries to desert by offering them land and money in America if they simply chose not to fight. Considering their options were, a) fighting for the British, putting their lives in danger in a conflict that was not as easy a victory as they'd thought, and eventually having to return to Germany to be sent off to fight and maybe die somewhere else, or b) getting 50 acres of land just for not fighting, relocating to a more hospitable climate, and finding communities of people who spoke their language with lots of pretty, single women whose fathers and brothers were off fighting for the Patriots, was it really a surprise that between four and five thousand of them opted for America?

The Christmas hymn that America sings to his three eldest girls is what English-speakers like myself now identify as "I Know a Rose Tree Springing." It is, in fact, a hymn of German origins that dates to the 15th century. Here is the literal translation:

"A rose has sprung up,  
from a tender root,  
As the old ones sang to us,  
Its strain came from Jesse  
And it has brought forth a floweret  
In the middle of the cold winter  
Well at half the night."

I felt it was rather fitting for America to sing something like this considering the origins of his states. Also, with New Jersey being the 'Garden State,' I felt she would like a song that mentions flowers. Even though Jersey is of Dutch origins, German still resonates with her because the languages share similar roots and because there were plenty of Germans living in the region (so she can understand German, too).

"Yankee Doodle" is the state song of Connecticut.

Benjamin Franklin really did take "air baths." He said they were good for a person's health.

No insult meant to Virginia (it's my state and has been home to my ancestors for generations), but I think Virginia has a whole lot of pride (both deserved and undeserved). Virginia was the birthplace and home of some of the most prominent Founding Fathers (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Henry) and was the seat of a great deal of political and economic power for much of America's early history. So, I think, the state, herself, would've been quite spoiled when she was little.

Ethan Allen led a small militia group, known as the "Green Mountain Boys," in the Vermont Republic during the American Revolution. They joined forces with Colonel Benedict Arnold (who was a respected and heroic figure before he turned traitor) and captured Fort Ticonderoga without firing a shot.
Polly Cooper was an Oneida woman who led a group of her fellow Oneidas hundreds of miles away from their home to bring food to the starving American troops at Valley Forge. Cooper and the other Oneidas stayed with the troops for a while, teaching them how to prepare the special white corn they'd brought and providing medical aid. The Tuscarora were dependents of the Oneida and had been brought into the Iroquois Confederacy at the insistence of the Oneida, who saw how devastated the Tuscarora had been from war and disease.

According to my family's lore, one of my ancestors saved the famous frontiersman Daniel Boone from a wolf attack. My ancestor was reported dead, but turned up years after the event with plenty of tall tales of his own.
Right, I know I’m probably frustrating some people by not immediately revealing the entirety of America’s family history in one sitting, but I want to space things out a bit. I will return to the historical narrative, but I do want to turn the focus back to the states. All things will be revealed in their proper time.

Sorry if this chapter seems a bit disjointed, but I’ve just had a bunch of different ideas bouncing around and this was the best way, I feel, that I could get them out.

Warning: Some sensitive content about hate and prejudice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Prussia and Denmark set their beers down, both had strangely sober expressions on their faces that were not in keeping with the amount of alcohol in their systems. France looked two steps from going into an overly-dramatic emotional display. England had retreated into unreadably stiff-upper-lip mode.

America shifted uncomfortably in the silence.

"Well, you guys gonna say anything?" America asked, hoping to break the tense atmosphere.

It did work, though not exactly the way America hoped it would as it had prompted France to suddenly pull him into a hug and start crying. He shouldn't be that surprised, though; France was a very expressive, emotional nation…not exactly dissimilar to how some of America's southern states could be. Not wanting to be rude by shoving the older nation off of him, America opted for silently praying that France would let him go and stop invading his personal space bubble. He liked his personal space bubble.

"You poor, brave boy," France said. "To have been through all that, all alone."

"I wasn't all alone," America replied. "My sisters helped a lot and my Founding Fathers and Founding Mothers were always looking out for me and the kids. Okay, France, seriously, you can let go of me, now."

"But how the hell did this happen?" England asked, finally coming back to himself. "Just drawing up a constitution shouldn't have caused your states to appear like that. If every constitutional government or federation of states resulted in the creation of child states, this wouldn't be such an unusual occurrence."

"That's why I was surprised that you dudes were all so shocked when I told you about them, Iggy," said America.

"It's not the first time a country has had multiple states," Prussia spoke up, sounding very serious. "West and I had sixteen brothers...give or take. They all sacrificed themselves so that West could become a united country and then they eventually disappeared."

As my awesome self must someday do, as well, Prussia left unsaid. I think Bavaria might still be
kicking around somewhere, too...happy bastard always was stronger-willed than any of us (probably all the awesome beer in his system).

"But they weren't biological brothers to you," England pointed out.

"Psh, what does a loser like you know?" Prussia said with a scoff. "If we weren't related, why'd we look so much alike, huh? You think about that? We had a father, too, in case you'd forgotten."

"Wait a minute, Iggy," said America, frowning in thought. "Didn't you tell me you and your sibs have a mother? You even once told me those awful scone things of yours were a recipe of hers."

England fought back the urge to strangle America for insulting his mother's scones and instead crossed his arms and scowled before responding tetchily, "That is completely different. What I mean is that we weren't born, you stupid git. It doesn't work like that for us."

"Why?"

"Because...because it just doesn't! Our 'parent' nations were never actually our parents. We just 'popped' into existence at certain points and they raised us."

"Ye daft bugger, ye actually still believe that?" a voice in a familiar brogue said from the doorway.

Everyone reeled back in shock as they noticed Scotland standing there, a rifle slung over his shoulder and a heavily inebriated Wales leaning against his side. Scotland had a condescending smirk on his face as he looked down at his little brother, who glowered back.

"Scotland, you damn tosser, what are you doing here?" England demanded.

"Got invited fer some huntin' by a few of me wee nieces," Scotland replied with a small shrug. Beside him, Wales had begun to snore. "Ye really still believe that hogshite I told ye about how wee nations are made?"

"What do you mean by 'hogshite'? Are you saying you lied about it?!"

"A dinnae ken how ye've made it this long bein' this dim."

"Scotland!"

"All right, all right, don't get yer knickers in a twist, ye daft bampot. Did ye really expect me ta tell ye where babies come from when ye were only a mere two hundred years old? And with all the whinin' and naggin', I had ta tell ye somethin' ta make ye shut up."

"You utter twat, Scotland! Do you really mean to tell me that nations can reproduce like humans?"

"Well, sorta, it's a little more complicated and even ah'm nae sure of all the details of how it works. But Mam really was our mother. And we did, sorta, have different fathers."

England sorted through the vague, hazy memories he had of his mother. Britannia, a fierce, flame-haired warrior woman who liked punching foreign invaders in the face...right before cutting them in half. He'd never really known a father-figure, though; after Britannia faded away, England had been basically abandoned by his siblings and, for a time, had been raised by the seven kingdoms in his lands...Mercia, Wessex, Sussex, Essex, Kent, Northumbria, and East Anglia who all disappeared around the time the kingdoms finally unified under King Alfred the Great (for whom England had named America), as well as a number of smaller kingdoms and territories which had eventually faded away, too (except for Isle of Wight, who mostly kept to herself these days). They weren't his
siblings, more like advisors and foster parents who happened to share some physical characteristics and personality traits; not dissimilar from Japan's relationship with his prefectures.

"Scotland, what the hell is this all about?" England demanded, his face turning red. "And what do you mean 'different fathers'?"

"Ah, well, it is a bit awkward. Ye see, Mam was ne'er really the 'settlin' doon' type and ah'm not entirely sure whose da was whose considerin' how many gents she went with."

A vein began to twitch in England's forehead and the other nations discreetly edged away from him (barring Scotland, who chose not to notice, and Wales, who was still completely plastered) as they sensed an impending meltdown.

"And whom might these gentlemen be?" England said through gritted teeth.

"Well, there was Gael, and Pict, and Jute, and Celt, and that annoying bugger Saxon…"

Prussia, who had been quietly taking another sip of his beer, suddenly began to choke. No, there was no way that could be the same person. Prussia's early childhood memories were faint, but he did recall one of his father Germania's younger brothers was named 'Saxon,' and that the man had disappeared when Prussia was still very small and his own older brother, Saxony, had been named in honor of their missing uncle (even though the two represented different regions and they had another brother, with a similar name, who did more or less represent that region). If his uncle had gone off to England and been involved with said nation's mother…that meant there was a chance that England was related to Prussia and Germany…So not awesome.

"…and ah believe that Scandia chap paid her a few compliments," Scotland continued. "Not to mention, ah always suspected she and Gaul was tradin' tastes."

"What?!" England shrieked, looking absolutely mortified.

France actually seemed a little embarrassed for England, too. Also, considering Gaul was his own mother, it did make the situation a little bit worse. France would never admit it, as the nation of love is supposed to be open-minded, but the thought of his mother and England's mother being involved with each other actually did kind of gross him out somewhat, too.

_Honestly_, France thought, _Maman should have had better taste than that._

"This is exactly why I didnae tell ye, Artie," said Scotland. "Ah knew ye'd overreact ta this, like ye do with everythin'. It's nae a big deal."

"You just told me our mother was a trollop and you don't think that's a big deal?!!"

"I don't see what's so disturbing, either, Iggy," said America, drawing England's furiously burning gaze to him. "I mean, yeah, it's probably better and more stable to have a functional, two-parent family, but it's not like it's the end of the world that your mom had a libido and didn't want to be tied down to anyone."

"America…for your own safety, I suggest you stop talking. _Right now._"

A couple of snorts came from Wales, who extracted himself from where he was leaning against Scotland to sway sleepily on his feet.

"What're we talkin' 'bout?" Wales slurred, still partly asleep.
"Mam's sex life," said Scotland.

"Ugh, do you have to? I learned enough 'bout that when she was makin' each of you little bastards."

That finally did it. England snapped and lunged at his eldest brother. Wales, while normally capable of fending off England's fits of rage, was still quite drunk and left unprepared for when his baby brother socked him in the jaw and followed this initial attack by trying to throttle the eldest Kirkland brother until Scotland yanked him back and held him in place.

A furious screaming match followed, until England eventually settled into the decision of chugging as much booze as he could to drown out the unwanted knowledge he'd gained of his darling mumsie's sexual habits.

Everyone else just tried to ignore his brooding as Prussia managed to bring the conversation back to 'awesome' topics that had nothing to do with anyone's mother's personal relationships.

Practically the second that Christmas and New Year's were over, a world conference was called.

It was to be held in America. No one knew what the conference was about, only that it had been labeled as "a matter of international importance." America had also received a message requesting that he bring one of his children…specifically, one of his few well-behaved children…to the meeting.

America had actually been quite pleased by the request, as he felt it was a sign that the nations were warming up to his kids. He did not directly announce the matter, as he didn't want his children to start arguing over who was picked. Instead, America subtly arranged for the conference to be held in the capital of the state he had chosen to bring with him.

Quite a number of nations were confused when he informed them the conference was to be held in some place called "Topeka, Kansas."

The first thing that caught people's attention when they walked into the conference center was that there were vases containing sunflowers the size of hubcaps everywhere. The other nations were slightly disturbed by the childlike glee radiating from Russia, who was exceptionally fond of sunflowers.

The second thing they noticed was that, in addition to the copious numbers of sunflowers, there were red, white, and blue bunting and American flags everywhere. The sheer amount of stars and stripes made the entire place look like one, big Fourth of July celebration.

The third thing they noticed was that there was a large painting of the former U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower hanging above the doorway, watching them with a kindly though still proudly martial gaze.

Finally, upon entering the room where the meeting was to take place, they noticed the teenage girl standing beside America as he welcomed the nations in. The girl was very petite in frame, her rather flat build making her look more like a child than a teen. Her skin was suntanned, though she did have a faint dusting of freckles. Her eyes were a warm, gentle hazel and her brown hair was tied into pigtail braids. She was wearing a blue and white gingham dress (the dress had pockets on the front which had sunflowers tucked into them) and silvery-white dress shoes; around her neck was a heart-shaped gold locket. She also wore a round campaign button which read: "I Still Like Ike."

"Hello, everyone," the girl said sweetly. "I'm so happy you've decided to visit."
The nations couldn't help but blush a bit at how cute she was. She was about on a par with Liechtenstein in levels of sheer adorableness. Even the nations who typically did not like America (or, at least, who claimed they didn't like him) had trouble finding something snide or rude to say to the cute girl who was smiling at them so kindly and sincerely, clearly genuine in her happiness to have visitors.

"Yes, well, please state your name for the purpose of this meeting," Germany said stiffly.

"I'm Kansas," the girl said brightly. "Dorothy Exodus Jones."

"Exodus?" England said in disbelief. "America, you named your daughter something as ridiculous 'Exodus'?"

"Well, actually-" America started, only to be cut off.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised after you told us what you'd named your eldest sons."

"Stupid Amerika," Russia said with a chuckle. "How unfortunate that you should be giving such a name to a little girl." Russia patted Kansas on the head. "There, there, little girl, I am sorry your father is such the idiot."

Kansas's smile had dropped and she looked a little teary-eyed.

"But, Daddy didn't choose my middle name," Kansas said. "I picked it."

That drew England and Russia up short. England immediately felt embarrassed by his blunder and Russia, for all that he acted like he didn't care what people thought of him, felt a bit of a guilty flush come into his face that he'd insulted a sweet little girl.

"You picked that name?" England repeated.

"Uh-huh," Kansas said quietly. "When I was about twenty, I asked Daddy if I could make that my middle name and he agreed. I chose 'Exodus' to honor the Exodusters, the freed slaves who came and found refuge on my land."

A few countries couldn't fight back an "aww" at that statement. Kansas blushed a little at all the fuss being made over her, but smiled shyly as she realized the nations were beginning to understand her decision. Choosing 'Exodus' as her middle name had been her way of officially saying to her siblings, "I am a Republican Free State and proud of it." She had tried to live her life by that ideal, continuously fighting the good fight for equality; being born at the onset of the Civil War and spending most of her formative years surrounded by her Northern siblings had had an enormous impact on shaping her view of the world. In a way, promoting liberty and bringing an end to racial discrimination was what she had been born for.

After all, if she was ever in doubt, all she had to do was ask herself, "What would Jesus do?"

Kansas didn't really listen much to the lectures delivered by the other nations. What did international hoopla have to do with her, anyway? She was only there because her daddy had told her it was important for her to attend, but she would much rather be back at her farm. Peaceful, quiet, not in anybody's way...that's just how she liked things. After all, spending her early years surrounded by war and bloodshed left her feeling very uncomfortable with the contention and animosity that she was presently witnessing from the nations.

"Now, to address a serious matter which was brought to our attention recently," said Germany. "That
being non-nation entities and the creation of personifications."

Germany motioned for Kansas to come forward. After turning to her father for a reassuring nod, Kansas stepped up and stood next to Germany. She looked at the stern, straight-laced nation and gave him a friendly smile; he kind of reminded her of her big brother Wisconsin…except older and without the cheese smell.

"As we have seen, certain countries, such as the United States, seem to be in possession of personified administrative regions," Germany continued. "These are not simple personifications, but actual, physical offspring of the nation they are a part of."

Kansas waved at the focused assembly of countries.

"Some nations also have personified administrative regions which are not related in this manner. For example, Japan has explained to me that his prefectures are personified but work as assistants rather than relatives. Is that correct, Japan?"

"Hai, that is correct, Germany-san," Japan answered.

"My own states were once personified as my brothers, though my last remaining brother, Prussia, has more knowledge of them than I. Further evidence brought forward by the United Kingdom suggests that we nations do not always appear spontaneously but, frequently, as the result of older personifications engaging in reproductive acts in the same manner as humans."

Kansas began to blush. It was hardly proper to be discussing such things in front of so many people.

"Therefore, it is my considered opinion, that further research be conducted into how we nations are created and if it is possible for administrative regions in other countries to be personified, as these states are." Germany gestured towards Kansas. "That is why I have requested the presence of one of these states to explain what factors contributed to her creation. Miss Kansas, if you would describe some of the events and actions which took place prior to your existence as a personification."

"Oh, well," Kansas said shyly. "I suppose my land was first settled by Paleo-Indians and ancient groups which developed into the later tribes. The first Europeans came with Coronado in 1541, and then I became part of the Louisiana territory. After the Louisiana Purchase, I was reorganized into a smaller territory. I…I have some memories from that time, but they are kind of foggy, like they belonged to someone else.

"Then there was the Kansas-Nebraska Act, of course. That's when Daddy's national government told people that they could move to my land. Lots and lots of people raced out to settle the area and create a new state. Of course, there was a lot of fighting, what with the pro-slavery and pro-abolition groups both wanting me to enter the Union as one thing or another. And then there were the raids and uprisings, what with Mr. John Brown encouraging violence against slave owners and the pro-slavery faction demanding response in kind.

"Then, once there was a large enough population, my people wrote a state constitution which, after being approved, eventually led to me being declared a state and, as a result…here I am!"

"And what of the role of your mother?" Germany asked. "We have all heard that America was married for a time in the nineteenth century and we would like to know what part she played in this."

Kansas turned bright red and glanced at her father, who, in contrast, looked ashen.

"I…I don't…"
"You are one of the children America had with his wife, ja?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"So, what role did she have in your life and your existence as a personification?"

"I…I…I don't really remember. I was the last child Daddy and Momma had together before…well, the unpleasantness."

"You mean that Civil War of America's," England finished for her. He shot a solemn but sympathetic look at America. "We know. France and I learned about how America's wife was also known as the 'Confederate States of America.' America's southern half."

"England, shut up," America said, voice like ice. "Shut up, right now."

"America, we need to know what happened," one of the other nations chimed in.

"You don't need to know anything about me. All you want is to pry into stuff that's none of your business. None of anyone's business, in fact."

"How is it that your southern region was your wife, America?" said yet another nation. "If your southern region became personified as a result of a civil war, wouldn't that personification be your sibling or child rather than a nation your own age?"


"Amérique, please," said France. "We just feel it is important and in the best interests of the world if-

"Just shut up!" America snapped. "All of you! Just leave it alone! Do you have any idea of how painful this subject is for me? Would any of you share something so personal with the rest of the world? Yet, you feel you can just demand answers from me and my kids about a part of our history we have been trying over a century and a half to forget just to investigate some stupid theories. Well, you can forget it. You are not entitled to know about my life. Especially with how many of you were hoping for me to fail as a nation back then, and how many of those present today who would like nothing more than for me and my family to suffer.

"I'm done. I am so sick of all of you thinking you have the right to treat me and my children like this. I am not dealing with this, now."

America stood up, walked over to take Kansas by the hand, and then stormed from the room leaving silence in their wake.

"That did not go well, Daddy," said Kansas.

"I know, Sunflower."

"You probably hurt a lot of people's feelings, today."

"They deserved it."

"Did they?"

"Yes! I've handled the whole awkward situation of introducing you kids to them as well as I could, especially since I never thought it would be such a big deal. But, now, I'm just getting really sick and
tired of them asking for more."

"They're just worried."

"No, they're not. President Washington always warned me to be careful about trusting other nations. But I just wanted so much to have friends, to get people to like me, that I tried to ignore what was always so obvious. That none of them ever really care; they only see how useful I can be to them and are more than willing to throw me away once they have what they want."

"Daddy, that's not true! I'm surprised you'd say such a thing."

"I honestly can't think of anything to prove otherwise."

"You're starting to sound paranoid, Daddy. I'm sure lots of the other nations like you. Even the ones that say they hate you are probably just saying that because they feel envious of how successful you are when it's been so difficult for them."

America looked up and Kansas's eyes met his. Few people outside the family got to see this side of America, the frightened and insecure nation who was barely holding back from snapping under the pressure of being a superpower. He hid this part of himself well, and his more cheerful and childish nature usually won out over the darker side of his personality. His children knew how hard it was for their father to deal with his issues; he'd had to grow up very quickly in a short space of time and had been haunted by heartbreak and betrayal, ever since. While he made friends easily, his trust in them was very fragile and could be just as easily damaged.

Kansas would admit that the nations had crossed a line with her father by pushing him so hard for information (and for putting her on the spot like that), but she also felt her father had overreacted a bit, that he had read too much into their motivations for wanting answers.

"Do you need a hug, Daddy?" Kansas asked.

"…maybe," America replied, pouting in a childlike way.

Kansas wrapped her arms around her father and hugged him as tight as she could.

"It's gonna be fine, Daddy," she said. "How 'bout we get some burgers and fries to cheer you up?"

"That…sounds really good, right now. Thanks, Sunflower."

The door to the conference center lounge opened and America nearly flinched when he saw the familiar hulking form of Russia enter, smiling in his deceptively innocent way. Why did Russia have to butt in now when America was having a father-daughter moment?

"Ah, hello, Amerika," Russia said brightly. "I hope you are to be feeling better, now, da?"

"Yeah, yeah, like you care, Commie," America replied testily.

"Of course I am caring about things that upset you, Amerika. After all, only I am allowed to make you suffer. Not to be worrying, the other nations will not bother you about your personal life again." Russia held up his lead pipe. "Magical Metal Pipe of Pain made sure of it."

America would've been touched had Russia not chosen to make the matter creepy and psychotic.

"Uh, thanks, I guess?" America said uncertainly.

"I have not seen you so angry in a long time," Russia continued. "Not even in Cold War were you so
angry. I think the last time was when I came to visit you that short time in the nineteenth century."

America grimaced. Not only was that decade a time which America longed to avoid discussing for obvious reasons, Russia was referencing an oft-forgotten part of their history. The period when America and Russia had been friends. They'd started out as pen-pals right around the time of America's Revolution; Russia's empress, Catherine, had been quietly supportive of American independence and, years later, her descendants had only strengthened American-Russian political ties. During America's Civil War, Russia had personally sent shipments of munitions and supplies to America to aid in the preservation of the Union and had, personally, visited America for the first time right after the war had ended. Not long after, the two nations had agreed to America purchasing the Alaska territory (which, on the very day the deal was signed, resulted in little baby Alaska being born). America had even invited Russia to his Centennial.

Losing that friendship when Russia became a Communist nation had deeply wounded America. It was why he hated being around Russia nowadays and certainly why he didn't want the larger country prying into his business. Russia had no right to know anything about him (certainly even less than many of the other nations America had yelled at in that conference room) and he definitely had no right to pretend to be friendly towards him.

"Hey, I know you," Kansas said, brow furrowing. "You were at Daddy's Centennial Expo."

Russia blinked at her and, looking closely, realized now that he had, in fact, seen this state before. He had thought she was just some tiny, little human girl, at the time; a bit sickly and pale, but still adorable and sweet. She'd even given him one of the sunflowers in her pockets and asked if he wanted to tour the Centennial Exposition with her since her daddy was busy with organizing the event. Russia, like many nations, had a soft spot for children and had let the child lead him around like a small, excitable tour guide.

"Da, and you are the little thing that used cuteness to trick me into buying you an ice cream," Russia said evenly.

"I-I'm not 'cute,'" Kansas said, her ears turning red. "I'm a strong, hard-working state who makes my living as a farmer. I trek through mud and feed pigs and get up at dawn to tend the fields. That's not cute!"

Russia patted her on the head.

"You may be taller than you were then, but you are still very cute."

Kansas puffed up her cheeks...in an adorably cute way...and gave her best attempt to scowl. Her scowl was not particularly effective, as her eyebrows naturally arched softly and her hazel eyes were far too warm to hold any convincing amount of indignation.

"C'mon, Daddy," Kansas said, taking America by the hand. "Let's go get those burgers."

"Might I join you?" Russia said pleasantly. "I do not know where is good place to eat around here."

"I don't think that's a good idea," said America. "You'd put me off my food."

"Oh, heaven forbid. You might accidentally lose some weight."

"Hmph, you're one to talk, Mr. I'm Just Big-Boned."

"This is all being muscle."
"And the gallon of vodka you drink every day."

"Vodka is a man's drink, not like the little girl drinks you have here."

"What's vodka?" said Kansas with an innocent tilt of her head.

"It is something for adults, Sunflower," America said.

"You mean like that 'alcohol' thing you sometimes talk about?"

"Uh, yeah. But it's not important. I know you prefer a nice bottle of Coca-Cola or something, right?"

"Amerika, does your daughter not know what booze is?" said Russia.

"Boo…ooze?" Kansas said slowly, as if trying to process what was being said.

America lightly grabbed Russia by the arm and turned him away (had anyone else tried to do so, Russia would have punched them) to quietly whisper to him: "Kansas has been a dry state since 1881 and she still doesn't really understand alcohol. If you try to explain it to her, she starts getting worked up, so just leave it."

"Daddy, my head is hurting," Kansas said with a twinge.

"Crud, too late."

Kansas started to breathe raggedly, which soon devolved into short, raspy wheezing. America quickly reached into the pocket of his jacket, pulled out an inhaler, and helped his daughter gently get her breathing back to normal.

"What is this all about?" Russia asked, hiding the note of concern in his tone.

"Kansas has asthma," America explained as he assisted Kansas in taking another puff from the inhaler. "Being back in her natural climate helps, but she can still get attacks especially if something gets her worked up." Kansas took a few more puffs before motioning to her father to stop. "You okay now, Sunflower?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Great, let's go. I think we've stayed too long, as it is."

America very resolutely refused to look at Russia as he and Kansas walked towards the door, hand-in-hand. He supposed he couldn't really blame Russia for triggering Kansas's asthma; he could hardly be expected to know she had the condition. After all, America was the only one there to really know about Kansas's asthma, California's mental deterioration, Pennsylvania's split personality, South Dakota's abscessed leg, Kentucky's epilepsy, Georgia's migraines, Washington's depression, Alaska's night-terrors, and the myriad of other mental and physical problems that plagued his children. How could anyone outside the family ever be expected to know about things like that?

How could any of the nations know anything about him or his states…when he'd shut them all out for so long?

A part of America knew that Kansas had been right. He had overreacted a bit to the interrogation by the other nations. Perhaps they really had just wanted to help and to learn more about him. He'd been in isolation for about a hundred years and then, more or less, began to dominate the international scene, acting as if he had all the answers to other people's problems because he was too afraid to
acknowledge his own. He was afraid…not just for himself, but for his children. Their family had been hurt too many times, betrayed and rejected too many times, for him to be careless with issues that ran as deep as what had happened with South.

If you had just talked to me, we could've worked things out, he thought to himself. You could've lived to see our children grow up. You could've done so much more for our people and our family. Why did you have to…?

America's free hand idly moved over a spot on his stomach. Hidden beneath his clothes there was a thin scar where a knife had been driven into him. They had been in an argument that started out a bit heated and ended with him looking down to see a blood-soaked blade being pulled out of his gut before collapsing to the ground.

"Daddy, you okay?" Kansas asked, seeing the pallor on her father's face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just need some burgers and I'll be right as rain."

Father and daughter were startled by the number of nations waiting awkwardly at the front door of the center.

Every one of them looked up when America and Kansas entered. England appeared particularly contrite; after all, his pushing and prying into America's personal life had really been the driving force that led to America's outburst in the meeting. America was further surprised by the number of nations that normally didn't like him much, particularly certain Middle Eastern countries, who seemed like they wanted to say something but were clearly too uncomfortable to approach him. America had, after all, shattered many people's impressions of him; to them, he wasn't the arrogant, airheaded Westerner who thought he was God, anymore. He was now a complex, damaged man trying to hold his family together and still put a happy face on everything.

America wasn't sure if it was a good thing that everyone now saw that.

"What's with all the doom and gloom, guys?" America said, forcing a bright smile on his face; it felt as painful as it looked.

"America," England started. "I want to apologize for-

America held up a hand to stop him.

"Don't," he said. "Just don't. I can't blame you, any of you, for being curious. None of you really know a lot about me. After all, it's not like my history's all that important in the grand scheme of things."

Quite a number of nations, particularly those with old and prestigious histories, looked shocked at such a pronouncement. History was incredibly important to many of them as it helped define their identities and cultures as nations. For a nation to call their history 'unimportant' was an act of profound self-effacement and even somewhat tragic, as a nation would have to either be incredibly humble or feel a great deal of self-hatred to be so dismissive of their past. Perhaps that was why America was more concerned with the future and pushing forward than focusing on the past.

"I…I need a bit of time to think things out," America continued. "As I've said, it's not something I like to discuss. I just…I have to think things through before I talk about…about South."

From the corner of his eye, America noticed Mexico tense. She had no more desire for the past to be brought up than America did. Her hatred for South ran deep; it predated what happened between
Mexico and America and the eventual war for Texas, going back to when South was known by a
different name. It wasn't just a question of borders, but of worldviews, opinions, and the different
experiences the two women had faced in dealing with colonization.

"And I'm sorry for storming out of the meeting like that," America added. "Totally unheroic of me."
He turned and smiled at Germany. "Your research idea sounded totes good, Germany, my dude. I'd
love to help in figuring out the whole 'how little nations are made' thing. Could change a lot of things
in the world. Heck, maybe other countries could have their own kids, too. My states find it pretty
boring that most of the personifications in their age range are related to them."

Some of the other nations started muttering excitedly to each other. The subject of children was
usually very sensitive, as most of the nations had, like England, believed that nations only 'popped'
into existence at certain points and that it was physically impossible for nations to actually be literal
parents. And, to think, the possibility of such a thing happening was brought to their attention
because of America, all because his crazy son New York decided to break into a world meeting to
drag his father to a baseball game.

"Now, if that's all the business for today, I have a dinner date with my little girl that can't be missed,"
America said. "Those hamburgers aren't going to eat themselves."

"Da, that sounds fine," said a familiar voice as a heavy hand came to rest on America's shoulder.

"Russia, I told you that you weren't invited."

"Nyet, you only said it wasn't a good idea. You never specified that I couldn't come along."

"He's got you there, Daddy," said Kansas.

America fought back the groan that threatened to break loose.

"Come on, it's not like inviting an old friend out for dinner is the worst thing that can happen,"
Kansas continued, pushing open the front door. "There are worse people you could be spending time
around than Mr. Russia."

As soon as they stepped outside, other nations following behind them, Kansas saw something that
only proved her point. Outside the conference center was a group of human protestors. The
protestors were shouting venomous comments about anything and everything that seemed to enter
their minds. Their picket signs carried messages like "God hates gays," "Burn in Hell, America,
"Kill more soldiers," "Planes crash, God laughs," and "America deserved 9/11."

"Oh, this day just gets better and better," America said dryly.

Most of the nations were absolutely horrified by the sheer quantity of hatred contained in that small
area. Some nations, though, were oddly apathetic to the display; these were the nations who were so
used to actual violent attacks that a bit of protesting was hardly going to unnerve them. Still, it was
immensely unsettling for most.

America straightened his back, took Kansas by the hand again, and started walking through the
crowd. The crowd screamed absolutely vicious things about how the United States deserved to suffer
for being "wicked and sinful" and for "allowing sodomites to live" and that they hoped God
destroyed the country. Kansas's face fell, mirroring the grim storm clouds which suddenly appeared
where before there had been only clear blue sky.

While the nations were, technically, a secret from humans, the people just seemed to recognize their
country's personification when within a certain proximity. Once the nation left that proximity, the
humans slowly forgot what that personification truly was. The longer a human spent in contact with a nation, such as in the case of their bosses, the more that human was able to remember who and what the nation was.

These people had gravitated towards the conference because they sensed America's presence, and their abject hatred of him compelled them to make an utter nuisance of themselves.

The other nations felt stirrings of sympathy for America. Seldom did it happen that humans hated their own nation, and, even then, that hatred was kept private rather than screamed in that nation’s face. America wasn’t the only one being targeted by the lunatics, however. Israel had to be physically restrained when he tried to lunge at one of the protestors who shouted “God hates Jews” at him. The Italy brothers and even Australia were taken completely off-guard when they saw signs specifically referring to them as being depraved and degenerate nations. Germany looked to be two seconds from strangling some idiot who carried a sign which read: “Gays are the real Nazis.”

It was an ugly, repulsive experience that left America feeling horribly ashamed and wishing that he could disappear. Freedom of speech was a right he and countless others had fought to protect, but his own people were abusing it to spew truly sickening vitriol about people for being even slightly different from them and making nonsensical and hypocritical claims about righteousness.

Thankfully, there were some sane people walking by who were willing to acknowledge how repugnant the whole display was.

"Hey," one normal person shouted at the protestors, "If you guys hate America so much, how's about you move to Russia!"

"We do not want them!" Russia called out.

That just seemed to make the protestors angrier. Many of them were practically frothing out the mouth as they shoved their signs into people's faces and shrieked their spurious interpretations of Scripture.

"I know how to solve this problem, my friend," Russia said softly from behind him. "There is nothing that cannot be fixed with Magic Metal Pipe of Pain." Russia hoisted up his beloved lead pipe, causing the other nations to shiver.

"Dude, you can't just smack my citizens with your pipe," America said, though he looked less outraged by the idea than he normally would.

"It is being all right. I have diplomatic immunity."

The protestors within earshot were suddenly less confident when Russia turned to smile menacingly at them, pipe poised at the ready.

"Why…why would you do that?" America asked.

"I told you before, my friend. Only I am allowed to make you suffer. No one else is permitted the privilege, not even your own people."

America looked uncertainly across the table at Russia as they ate their food in silence. They were at a small, family-owned diner that Kansas had brought them to.

Kansas watched her father and his former friend (now sort of enemy, but not completely), idly munching the fries on her plate as she observed the interaction. She discreetly checked her phone
under the table; the pictures and videos of what Russia had done to the protestors had gone viral. Many of her siblings had even liked and shared some of the footage. While she disapproved of using violence to resolve the situation, Kansas had to grudgingly admit that she hadn't been exactly upset by it.

"I must admit I like your American food more than I thought I would," Russia said. "I had feared we were going to be eating at one of those McDonald's places."

"You actually think we Americans eat there regularly?" Kansas said. "Why would we do that when there are great local places with real food?"

"I am just always seeing America with a food bag from that place."

"Dude, I only go there if I'm in a rush or craving fries," said America. "You just don't hang out with me often enough to know where I usually go to eat."

"Ah, perhaps we should spend more time together, then, da?"

America narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Russia.

"What's your deal, Russia?" America said. "It's not like we're friends, anymore. Why even bother pretending?"

"Can't I just be catching up with an old ally?"

"We haven't been allies for a long time, either."

Kansas sipped at her strawberry milkshake, feeling very out-of-place in the strange moment as she remembered what had led up to it. When Kansas was little, her father used to get so excited by the interesting stories he and his pen-pal shared with each other. America practically bounced off the walls whenever his friend decided to pay him a visit. And then, after the frigid silence developed between them following Russia's revolution, America had been so hopeful to see Russia when the Americans finally joined the Second World War; that Russia barely seemed to acknowledge America during that time, or else aggressively challenged him to conquer an important enemy destination first, shattered much of that naïve, innocent hope. The tense truce between them eventually escalated into a seething resentment and all-but outright war.

Kansas certainly felt some resentment towards Russia for hurting her father, as well as the decades of fear she, herself, had lived in that, at any moment, her whole world could be destroyed by a nuclear blast or a Communist takeover. It was difficult to see past that, but, at the same time, she knew – just knew – that her father and Russia both missed being friends.

Neither one would admit it, obviously. They were both too proud and stubborn to say it. Russia wouldn't because he didn't want to look weak and America wouldn't because he was terrified of being hurt again.

People often thought Kansas was slow on the uptake, old-fashioned, saw things in black-and-white, and couldn't read people very well, but she was actually more insightful than she was given credit for. She saw how Russia reacted when someone tried to hurt her father; he didn't come to America's defense because of the "no one can hurt you but me" excuse he'd given. He cared about America. They might not have the same close bond they'd shared in the nineteenth century, but there was still some strange force that bound them together.

As America and Russia continued to stare each other down, Kansas took another thoughtful sip of her milkshake.
General Eisenhower, Kansas thought to herself, I know you'd have some reservations about this. But I think it's high-time Daddy and Russia became friends, again. Now, let me see. Who do I know that's good at making friends?

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Do any of my fellow history buffs and fans of Game of Thrones/ASoIaF agree that the Seven Kingdoms are a very obvious reference to the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy?
No offence meant to Britannia. But so many different groups came and settled her that it made me think she just liked playing the field and didn't see the need to get married.
If any of Germany and Prussia's brothers are still alive, I think Bavaria would definitely be one (no way anyone that independent is going to be dissolved before Prussia).

Kansas's capital, Topeka, gets its name from a Kansa-Osage term which means "place where we dug potatoes."
Kansans love their sunflowers (they are the sunflower state, after all) and they are extremely patriotic.
President "Ike" Eisenhower was a Kansas resident (he was born in Texas, but Kansas was where he grew up).

I'm sure we all know about Kansas and the Wizard of Oz. Seriously, people, do not even bother making Oz jokes to Kansans. They have heard them all. Also, the original slippers that Dorothy got in the story were silver, not ruby like in the movie (hence, why Kansas's shoes are silvery-white). Poor Kansas has the human name of "Dorothy," so she has to put up with a lot of teasing (my headcanon is that L. Frank Baum based his character of Dorothy Gale on Kansas).

With the signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, both pro-abolition and pro-slavery groups raced to occupy the open territory to determine whether Kansas would be a Slave State or a Free State. The two groups clashed furiously and, mostly due to the actions of the abolitionist John Brown, the situation erupted in a series of violent skirmishes and brutal attacks known as "Bleeding Kansas." Kansas continued to be a focal point of civil rights, as Topeka was the location of the famous case Brown v. Board of Education which resulted in the Supreme Court ruling that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.
Rev. Charles Sheldon, who coined the phrase "What would Jesus do?", was a resident of Topeka.

People often forget that America and Russia used to basically be besties during the nineteenth century and a good deal earlier. The Russians had supported America's independence, even if not openly (they were hoping for trading privileges with the U.S. and Tsarina Catherine didn't like the British very much). They also really did send supplies to the Union during the Civil War and were one of the few nations that believed the U.S. would come out of the situation a still united country. One can only imagine how much it must have hurt when America's best friend soon became his archenemy. There may or may not have been a hint of RusAme in the latter part of this (if you squint). It's one of my favorite ships, but I also like them as friends, too. As I think I said earlier in the fic, though, I want to keep shipping out of this story (other than what is relevant to America's history and the creation of the states; so, sorry if I'm breaking any RusAme hearts, but stay posted for possible future works).
Kansas has been pretty much a dry state since the beginning. First in prohibition and still going pretty strong on the no booze front.

Topeka, Kansas is the home of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church, a group known for its inflammatory hate speech against basically anyone and anything not in line with their narrow-minded view of the world (those signs and slogans the protestors used are based on ones actually used by WBC). The most common victims of their bigotry are homosexuals, but they also hate any religious groups other than theirs (especially Jews, Muslims, and Catholics) and have even been known to express profound anti-Americanism. And, for some odd reason, when they're not too busy hating America, they have a particular hatred for Italy and Australia. I consider myself to be fairly conservative (mostly on issues concerning sanctity of life), but I think that screaming bile and calling for people to be arrested or killed simply because of religion or sexual preference is just disgusting (seeing as my great-great-grandparents were killed in the Holocaust for being Jews, I have very limited patience for bigotry). I think we should be more concerned about our own failings than trying to shame decent, ordinary people just for being different. I will kindly direct any fellow Christians (or non-Christians who read the Bible) to Matthew 15:14, "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch."

Fun Fact to end on a light note: Kansas was also the home of the famous, female aviator Amelia Earhart, so I think Kansas is part of the U.S.A. family flying team.
How to Make Friends

Chapter Notes

There is one state, in particular, who loves to make friends. She might also be a bit fond of yaoi (I'm throwing the fangirls a bone, here – or, at least, a chewtoy).

Please remember, it is never my intention to offend anyone. I based certain parts of this chapter on international political events and relations as I see them through my cultural lens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"...and that's the problem, sis," Kansas said, fidgeting slightly as she looked pleadingly across the table at her big sister.

Warm, golden-brown eyes blinked back at her as her sister carefully set down her coffee cup. Fingers began to drum lightly on the table top, a sure sign that the older state was deep in thought.

"That is quite the conundrum you've got there, Dotty," she replied in her oddly soothing voice. Out of all the Midwestern dialects, hers was the most audibly appealing; it wasn't as nasal as Minnesota's and it didn't really have the kind of drawling quality that states closer to the south had. "I think you are quite right, though. We must do what's best for Papa. Why come to me with this problem, though?"

"Well, sis, you do have quite the list of friends," said Kansas.

"I don't keep a list of how many friends I have, Dotty. I just consider everyone I meet to be a friend."

"And that's really kind of what we need, right now. Daddy's normally really good at making friends, but it's not as easy for him to re-make friends. You remember it took quite a bit for him to make up with Mr. Japan after World War Two."

"Yes. He didn't try to mend bridges until after Hawaii...became a state."

The two sisters sat in silence and each took a rather awkward sip from their coffee cups. Hawaii's admission as a state was a very strange and uncomfortable subject. It had been much like what happened with Vermont – a death and rebirth – but it was more complicated and painful. Hawaii had never been meant to be a state. She was considerably stronger than a little micronation like Vermont Republic, but she had been taken over by force due to human greed and arrogance.

Hawaii's admission to the Union was yet another of those family stories that the Jones household tried to forget.

"Well, I'm always happy to help," the older state said evenly. "And I have a couple of close friends who will likely be at that conference, too. It would be nice to meet up with them, again, and they could probably help with our plans. Oh, perhaps I should call Yucatán and see if he'd care to join in on the fun, too."

"That sounds perfect, sis," said Kansas with clear relief in her tone. "Shall we head off, now?"
"In a minute, Dotty. I say we enjoy some of my homemade Scotcheroos before we do anything else."

"Isn't it too early for that much sugar?"

"Don't be silly, Dotty. There's never a wrong time for one of Big Sister Iowa's Scotcheroos."

Iowa nodded along as she listened to the deep, richly-accented Spanish words as Yucatán chatted amicably over the phone with her. She always thought his particular dialect was very pretty with its slight emphasis on *sh* sounds, and had told him, Oaxaca, and Michoacán that (they were often a little self-conscious about their regional accent, especially since their more northerly siblings teased them about it).

"Yes, Joaquín, that sounds fine," Iowa said in response to a question he asked her. "What's that? No, I don't mind you bringing your jaguar cub as long as you clean up after him if he makes a mess. Oh, one more thing, could you be a darling and call Yamanashi to let him know we're having another meeting of the Besties Club? *Gracias*, Joaquín, I appreciate it. Okay, see you soon."

She clicked off her phone and continued on her way towards the conference room. She wouldn't just barge into places, of course; unlike *some* people, Iowa actually had self-control. She never really had trouble getting into places, anyway; most people liked Iowa, as a general rule, and even those that didn't tried to stay on her good side, especially when the presidential election season rolled around.

Iowa rocked back and forth on her feet and silently pondered how she would go about this. America and Russia had quite a number of differences, both personal and political. Iowa would be lying if she said she was an unbiased judge, considering America was her father and she would gladly punch the kidneys of anyone who hurt or threatened him; however, she did believe it was better to let things go and try to mend bridges with people.

After all, America was a country of second chances and fresh starts. The future is what is important, not the past. Iowa certainly never held onto grudges for past wrongs…ever.

The Republic of Kosovo let out a weary sigh and stood up as the meeting broke for lunch. She had no idea how her big brother Albania ever got used to it once he started attending nation conferences. It was tiring enough as it was, but Kosovo could really do without the snide, condescending remarks from Serbia and his overgrown yet comrade Russia. She was a legitimate, internationally-recognized nation, for goodness sake! Even if those two jerks wouldn't admit it. Most of the other Balkans recognized her, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina (but their decision was understandable) and that cowardly hypocrite Romania – heck, Romania's little brother Moldova received more recognition than Kosovo, and Moldova was physically still just a little kid!

At least Kosovo had some real friends. People who cared and looked out for her no matter the risk. Like her big brother, of course.

She turned and smiled over at Albania, who smiled reassuringly back. He never abandoned her, no matter how difficult things got for him. Even after all the violence and tragedy he'd had to go through – or even the isolation the communist government had implemented over him in the twentieth century – he kept fighting to protect her even more than himself.

And, of course, Croatia and Slovenia and Bulgaria and North Macedonia and even Montenegro recognized her. She had been surprised by Montenegro, considering she suspected the other nation still harbored some feelings for Serbia despite their messy breakup after Yugoslavia fell apart
(though, for the life of her, Kosovo couldn't understand what Montenegro ever saw in him). It was nice to know that she had support from her neighbors. Even Mr. Turkey supported her independence despite the issues it caused between him and Serbia.

Then there were all the countries all over the place that supported her from the very first. Most of Western Europe, a number of places in the Americas and Africa, quite a few Asian countries, and even a large number of small island countries all lent their support. Mr. America was, to be honest, the one she liked most if she had to pick a favorite ally. Not to say she didn't like and appreciate Mr. Canada, Mr. England, Mr. France, and all the other wonderful nations who told her they believed in her, but Mr. America would have to be her Number One ally (other than her big brother, of course).

Kosovo even became very close friends with other nations who also knew what it was like to not get the respect they deserved.

"Lí-hó, Arjana," a cheery voice said beside her, prompting Kosovo to turn and smile as she saw Taiwan standing there.

"Mirëdita, Mei," Kosovo said in response.

Another of her dear friends and allies, Taiwan had been a strong supporter of Kosovo's status as a nation. It had probably started out as Taiwan's attempt to thumb her nose at China, who was steadfastly refusing to acknowledge Kosovo, but Taiwan and Kosovo had quickly become friends in their own right outside of politics.

"Have you been doing okay?" Taiwan asked. "I noticed Serbia was giving you some trouble during the meeting."

"He's always like that," said Kosovo. "At least he knows better than to take it past a few insults, now. Especially when Big Brother, Mr. America, and Mr. Turkey are around. Anyway, enough about that. How about we go get some lunch?"

"Sure! I heard there are a couple little places nearby that sounded good."

The two female nations continued to chat amicably as they headed for the door. As the nations all filtered out of the room, everyone was once again taken by surprise (though, by now, they should be used to it) to see yet another of America's states waiting outside.

She was a fairly tall girl, with a sturdy, muscular build that would have seemed almost masculine had she not had very distinctive female attributes which were likely so pronounced due to the rich, fertile farmlands she was known for. Her facial features were also not particularly delicate and seemed to have a harder cut than those of her sisters. She wore a slightly frilly white dress which she had accessorized with a red, white, and blue striped ribbon around her waist which was tied up in a large bow. Her long, yellow-blonde hair was pulled back (by another red, white, and blue bow) so that it fell around her face in silky curls. Around her neck was a gold pendant of an eagle.

The girl's golden-brown eyes lit up when she saw two of the people she'd been very eager to meet with.

"Mei! Arjana!" the state exclaimed, waving excitedly at Taiwan and Kosovo.

"Sally!" Taiwan called back, one hand shooting up to wave back. "We weren't expecting to see you, here!"

'Sally' bounded up to the two countries and pulled them into a hug. The three teenage girls then began chatting rapidly with each other while the other nations looked on in amazement. After all,
since when had Taiwan and the only partially-recognized Republic of Kosovo known one of America's states so well?

"Haven't seen you gals since our last slumber party," the state said. "That was last April, wasn't it?"

"I know, it's been way too long," said Taiwan.

"Po, it's so hard to find time off from work, these days," said Kosovo.

"I hope you gals have some free time, today," said the state. "I invited Yucatán over and he's going to see if Yamanashi Prefecture can make it, or at least FaceTime with us."

"That sounds great, Sally!" said Taiwan. "Did you make any of those Snickeroo things you made last time?"

"Of course."

"What is going on, here, aru?!" China finally snapped.

"Huh? What's wrong, Yao?" said Taiwan. "Arjana and I were just having a talk with our friend."

"Sarah Jones," the state said pleasantly. "Better known as 'Iowa,' but I prefer to be called 'Sally.' Nice to meet you."

Iowa offered her hand to China for a handshake, but he reared back as if her touch was poisonous.

"Aiyah! First I find out Hong Kong has been meeting one of America's states behind my back for decades," China said furiously. "Now I find my traitorous little sister has been doing the same, aru!"

"You mean Hong Kong never told you that we've been friends with the states for a good long while?" Taiwan said with a quizzical tilt of her head. "Not even that Macau's been dating Nevada since World War Two?" Taiwan giggled a bit as a memory came back. "They even shared a Victory Kiss when the war ended, it was so cute. Like a scene from a movie. Or a doujinshi, she left unsaid.

China's face turned as red as his flag and he looked as if he was about to explode with rage as he rounded on his little brothers. Macau just kept his calm, enigmatic smile on his face while Hong Kong rolled his eyes. Hong Kong had told China months ago, when the overbearing old man had barged in on his FaceTime with New York, that he, Macau, and Taiwan had known about the states for ages. In fact, Hong Kong had first met the states during WWII when he'd been involved in resistance operations against Japan by helping Allied agents run covert missions. Among those Allied agents had been some of America's states, including Nevada who had proceeded on her own to Macau's place where things played out like one would expect – Hong Kong had seen enough spy dramas to make some guesses, but he didn't really want to know the details of his brother's personal life. Even before that, Hong Kong had met some of Canada's provinces at Wong Nai Chung Gap where they had fought fiercely to defend him against Japan's invasion until the force of sheer numbers compelled England to surrender Hong Kong to Japan.

"I did try to tell you, Old Man," said Hong Kong evenly. "It's not my fault you can't listen."

Macau shrugged and said, "Frankly, as far as I can see, who I am romantically involved with isn't your business."

"Of course it's my business, aru!" China shouted at Macau, who remained unflappable.

"You know, China, you should really consider using an 'indoor voice' if you want to be taken
seriously."

"This is my indoor voice, aru! My indoor voice is anything I say it is!"

"Maybe that's why I'm going deaf," Hong Kong said quietly, though not quietly enough that China didn't hear him.

"Why you little-!"

"Hey, wait," said Iowa. "You're China?"

"Yes, what of it, aru?" China said, momentarily distracted from his tantrum.

Iowa reached into her purse and, with a strangely impassive expression, pulled out a newspaper and shoved it into China's arms.

"I believe this is yours," Iowa said tonelessly. "Word to the wise: I don't like it when other nations threaten my people or their livelihood. And my people don't like it when foreign governments attempt to manipulate them. Especially when those foreign governments are supposed to have non-interference agreements."

China looked down at the newspaper which had been thrust into his hands. The title of the paper was The Des Moines Register. China was confused for a moment until, after glancing over the articles, he saw a familiar little piece which his own China Watch had written as part of a plan China had cooked up to get back at America for the recent tariffs. It had clearly not had the effect he'd been aiming for. After a moment of consideration, he realized that trying to use the same manipulation tactics which worked on brainwashed masses on free-thinking Iowan farmers was probably not his cleverest idea.

Not his worst idea ever, of course. But certainly not a star on the achievements chart.

"Look, I'm willing to let the incident go," Iowa said. "Even though it was a grievous insult to my people's intelligence. However, I am not the type to hold onto cultural misunderstandings and am perfectly content to let bygones be bygones. If for no other reason than I don't want to insult Taiwan by cursing out her older brother."

"I don't mind," Taiwan said in her normally, bubbly way. "Feel free to smack him around a bit, too, if you want. My big brother's a bit of a jerk, sometimes."

"Taiwan!" China shouted with clear indignation.

Taiwan was still smiling cheekily as she stuck her tongue out at China. Iowa and Kosovo had to stifle their own snickering.

"I will not be laughed at by people who are not even real nations, aru," China said. "You all shouldn't even have been allowed to attend this meeting."

Quite a few nations winced at what China said, especially as they noticed Kosovo's expression darken. The young republic was still a little sensitive when certain nations who refused to acknowledge her independence decided to make jabs at her because of said issue with international recognition. China was just one of the nations who was particularly unpleasant about it, but there were a few more who were even worse. Unfortunately, one of the worst offenders happened to be the very nation that Iowa was trying to get her father to be friends with again.

"Da, China is quite correct," a childishly happy voice added. "Little non-nations shouldn't be getting
involved in the big matters. They should leave that to real countries who know what they are doing. If we keep letting little provinces like Kosovo into meetings, who knows what silly problems they will cause?"

Russia either didn't know or – more likely – didn't care that his words had made more than a few people angry. Kosovo was infuriated by the blatant insult, but also visibly shaking in fear due to the fact that it was Russia. While Kosovo seldom held back in making her opinions known, she was more than a little terrified of Russia (as all sane nations are). It certainly didn't help her mood any when Serbia started laughing at Russia's comment.

"Excuse me," Iowa said in a voice even colder than the one she had used when speaking to China about the newspaper and her words were laced with a venomous passive-aggression. "But I do not believe your opinion was asked for, Mr. Russia. My dear friend Kosovo, whom I once gladly shed blood to protect from cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing by certain corrupt government officials, was just talking to me and our other dear friend Taiwan before her brother interrupted us about private matters that are, quite frankly, none of your business."

Russia and Iowa stared each other down, both with eerily calm smiles which fooled no one. Thankfully, there were enough witnesses around to prevent bloodshed.

"You are certainly being America's daughter," Russia said to Iowa. "Same headstrong arrogance to pick fights that aren't yours."

"Considering, between you and my daddy, only one of you has had an entire government system change in the last hundred years and neither of you is currently flying a flag with a hammer and sickle on it, I'd say that attitude has done its job well over the years," Iowa replied.

The corner of Russia's mouth twitched, but he hadn't started muttering the dark "KolKolKol" sound he made when angered, making it difficult to figure out what he was thinking. Finally, Russia began to laugh. An honest-to-goodness, real, sincere sound of amusement rather than something cold and mocking to portend imminent dismemberment. Those who had more than a few unpleasant experiences with Russia were immensely unsettled.

"Ah, little state, only your father has ever been able to make me laugh like that," he said. He patted her lightly on the head, causing Iowa to pout and glare in a way very similar to how her father reacted when he believed someone was teasing him.

"Russia, what are you doing?" Serbia said impatiently, glaring first at Kosovo – as if blaming her for the entire situation – and then at Iowa. "That rotten little brat insulted you. And she's defending that upstart bitch Kosovo's imagined independence."

Unfortunately for Serbia, at the precise moment he chose to say that, America, Turkey, and Albania had managed to make their way through the crowd to see what was holding everyone up from going to lunch. Now, America and Turkey might not get along very well considering some of the recent political issues they'd argued over, but a mutual friendship with Albania and feelings of protectiveness for Kosovo meant they took a very dim view whenever Serbia started trouble over Kosovo's independence.

Albania, of course, having an overprotective-older-brother instinct to rival Switzerland's for Liechtenstein and an eagerness to resort to taking direct and brutal action when someone he loved was hurt or insulted, was the first to respond.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY ABOUT MY SISTER?!"
Not even allowing Serbia a chance to respond, Albania lunged at him and – completely disregarding potential political ramifications – began to pummel him.

"GET OFF ME, YOU STUPID FUCKING ŠIPTAR!" Serbia screamed back at him.

The other Balkan nations winced as they saw Albania's expression distort into blind rage at the hated ethnic slur. Croatia and Slovenia just tiredly pressed their hands to their faces and looked away. Herzegovina pressed herself against Bosnia, thankful for his comforting presence in the face of what they were about to witness. Bulgaria and Romania quietly made bets about what limb Albania would attempt to rip off of Serbia this time.

Albania let out a piercing yell and all the spectating nations had to turn away as things got very unpleasant, very quickly. Normally, Albania was very calm, collected, and dignified; however, Serbia had a special talent for winding him up and bringing out the worst aspects of Albania's violent temper (which was a pity, as Albania had been doing better in recent years as his crime rate had finally begun to go down).

"Are you girls all right?" America asked his daughter and her two friends, completely disregarding the Yugoslavic beat-down going on behind him.

"We're fine, Daddy," Iowa said.

"Arjana," said Turkey, looking intently at Kosovo through the eyeholes of his mask and resting his hands on her shoulders in a reassuring manner. "Serbia didn't try to hurt you again, did he?"

"No, Mr. Turkey," said Kosovo.

"Because, if he did, I will kick his ass, myself."

Kosovo looked around him to see her big brother twisting Serbia's leg into an unnatural angle that was, to judge from Serbia's expression, exceptionally painful.

"I think Bekim is taking care of it, Mr. Turkey," said Kosovo.

"All right," said Turkey, sounding a little disappointed. "But if Serbia so much as looks at you in a way that makes you uncomfortable, you will tell me immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"This is all being such a cute scene," Russia said pleasantly.

"Oh, I suppose you had nothing to do with this, right, Commie?" America said with a glare.

"Not at all. And, as your little daughter so eloquently pointed out, I am not a communist nation, anymore. Largely thanks to you, I should add."

America's cheeks turned red and he began to splutter as Russia's response brought him up short. After all, it was hard to think of a biting comeback to what was, in a sense, something of a compliment.

Turkey and Kosovo scowled in an almost identical fashion at the large, northern country. Turkey had never gotten along with Russia, due mostly to the historical rivalry of their respective empires and their more recent clashes of opinion on practically every event in the past few decades or so. Kosovo, of course, had initially learned to hate Russia from her days as part of the Ottoman Empire watching Turkey face off against him, time and time again. Nowadays, however, both of them were unable to
pick a fight with Russia, despite their persistent and – if anything – strengthened antipathy, due to Russia's considerable economic and political influence.

Iowa and Taiwan, on the other hand, got strange glints in their eyes as they observed the byplay between America and Russia. A few nations watching nearby could practically see the gears turning in the teen girls' heads. Their expressions were eerily similar to the one Hungary got when confronted with the possibility of witnessing a certain type of relationship between two men. It was a calculating and devious expression which many nations had come to fear.

Kansas tried not to show any irritation as her living room was commandeered by Iowa and her friends. Due to the disruption of Albania and Serbia's fight, which had needed mediation from Germany and the supposedly-neutral Switzerland (the latter of whom, strangely enough, seemed particularly sympathetic to Albania, in this case) to diffuse another potential Balkan War, the remainder of the world meeting was cancelled that day. Iowa had, subsequently, invited Kosovo and Taiwan to come with her back to Kansas's house.

It wasn't that Kansas necessarily minded her sister's friends, but she did feel like something of the odd one out, considering how close Iowa's little circle was.

"...And so, I said, 'But, Congressman, that's unconstitutional,'" said Iowa. "And he sneers at me and replies, 'How do you know?' And I say, 'My daddy used to read us the Constitution and Bill of Rights to put us to sleep every night. I can recite every last line of those documents verbatim, if I have to. You mean to tell me you don't know your own rights?' And I finished out by looking him straight in the eye and saying, 'Bro, do you even liberty?' That shut him up pretty quick."

Kansas furrowed her brow as Iowa's friends all snickered at whatever that inside joke was about. The only other person who wasn't laughing was Yamanashi Prefecture, who looked back at the others through the computer screen (as he wasn't presently able to visit in-person) with a serene expression; however, he was usually somewhat aloof from the more expressive habits of the others. It certainly put him in contrast with Yucatán, who was rolling around and laughing far more than was really appropriate for Iowa's little joke.

"All right, everyone," said Iowa. "Let's get serious for a moment. We have a few major topics to discuss. Like how Arjana's getting a new ally," Iowa added with a knowing smile, causing Kosovo to blush.

"Really?" said Taiwan. "Another country has recognized you? Who is it?"

Kosovo twiddled her fingers and mumbled something.

"I am sorry, I did not hear you on the speakers, Arjana," Yamanashi said. "Could you please repeat that?"

"Liberia agreed to open political relations last May," Kosovo said, trying to maintain an air of dignity. "And he'll be opening an embassy with me soon."

Iowa and Taiwan shared sly smiles as Kosovo remained red-faced.

"It's nice to know that James is making friends," said Iowa. "He's always been a little shy." She turned thoughtful for a moment. "But, I do recommend that you be careful with him. James has had a few issues over the years and can get very agitated if he thinks he's being made fun of."

Not to mention the horrible internal issues Liberia had been facing, what with violence, crime, corruption, gender inequality, and some other, far more unpleasant, things which it was best not
bring up in polite company.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind when I see him," Kosovo said, subtly indicating she wanted the matter dropped.

The now-predatory smirks on Iowa's and Taiwan's faces clearly showed that she hadn't heard the end of the subject.

"Is…is anyone hungry?" Kansas offered weakly, hoping for an excuse to extract herself from the awkward situation she was in. "I can make us all some dinner."

"Ooh! I can help!" Yucatán exclaimed, shooting to his feet. "My poc chuc is envied by all my siblings."

"Poke shuck?"

"Poc chuc," Iowa corrected easily. "It's a kind of barbecue pork."

Yucatán did not give Kansas any time to say whether or not she would let him help her cook as he grabbed her hand and dragged her off into the kitchen. Within seconds, the sounds of clanging pots and pans could be heard.

"Well, that should keep them busy for a while," said Iowa.

"Perfect," said Taiwan. "As much as I like Joaquín, he's a bit of a blabbermouth. And I don't know if we can trust him to keep this conversation quiet."

"What conversation?" said Kosovo, still somewhat flustered from her interrogation about Liberia.

"My new doujinshi, of course!"

Taiwan whipped out a hand-drawn manga of her own creation. All that time she had spent with Japan had left her with a fondness for that particular artistic form. Iowa was about to add that, no, that wasn't the key point of the meeting of the Besties Club, but froze as she took a glance at her bubbly friend's newest work.

"How did you get this done so fast?" Iowa asked.

"What?" said Kosovo, trying to lean in for a closer look.

"It's a gift I have," Taiwan said coyly. "Also, when I was forced to go live at Japan's house, he didn't know what to do with me so he had me create manga all day to keep me busy."

"What is it?" Kosovo insisted. "Let me see – sweet, merciful Allah!"

Kosovo had gotten a very good look at what Taiwan's deliciously deviant mind had produced and threw herself backwards, eyes wide and face even redder than before.

"Is that supposed to be…?" Kosovo trailed off.

"Mr. America and Mr. Russia," Taiwan said with a slight chirp in her tone.

"Could someone please hold it up to the screen for me?" Yamanashi said evenly.

Iowa held up the doujin and slowly turned the pages as the prefecture gave a soft 'hmm' to each one.
"This is quite good," he added. "You can practically hear the clothes ripping in that scene where-

"Don't, just, don't," Kosovo interrupted, looking mortified. "Sally, how can you possibly like something like that? It's Russia and your father! That is disturbing on multiple levels."

Taiwan sighed sadly and rested a hand on her heart.

"Some people just don't appreciate fine art," Taiwan said.

"Not to worry, Mei," said Yamanashi calmly. "We'll convert her to the yaoi side, eventually."

"If Big Brother knew I was looking at something like that," Kosovo said, burying her face in her hands, "He'd be furious."

"Why?" said Taiwan. "Because it's yaoi or because it's Mr. Russia and Mr. America?"

"I don't want to talk about this."

"We've kind of gone off-track," said Iowa. "My original plan for our discussion was how to get my dad and Mr. Russia to be friends, again. But, thinking about it now, I guess setting up for real-life yaoi is just as good a plan."

"What?!" Kosovo nearly shrieked.

"Well, seeing as my dad's relationships with women haven't ended well, maybe he'd do better with a nice guy, instead."

"But Russia is not exactly a 'nice' guy, is he?" Yamanashi said.

Kosovo had curled up in a ball on the carpet while Iowa, Taiwan, and Yamanashi debated the subject of America and Russia's relationship. When Kansas came in to tell them the food was ready, Iowa quickly hid Taiwan's doujinshi in her cleavage (as it was the last place anyone who wanted to keep their hands would ever dare to look). It wouldn't do for Kansas to find out that Iowa had made a slight alteration to their plans and, subsequently, kick up a fuss about things like 'personal boundaries' and how 'the universe doesn't revolve around smutty comic books.'

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yes, Iowa has her own 'Best Friends/Besties' Club. Iowa is officially the sister state of Taiwan, Kosovo, Yucatan, and Yamanashi. There are a couple more places she's connected to, but they aren't personified. And the Republic of Kosovo is a REAL country and I will personally fight anyone who says different! *Hugs Kosovo and glares at countries who refuse to acknowledge her*

I don't even know where to start on the issues with the Balkans.

Kosovo and Albania are the two most pro-American countries in Europe. My mother (who used to be in the state department) went on a diplomatic mission to Kosovo when it became independent and the people she met there just doted on her as soon as they found out she was American and told her all about how much they loved America and how much America's support meant to them. Albania has had a long-standing admiration for the U.S. since WWI when President Woodrow Wilson saved Albania.
from getting divided up amongst the Allies (even when the Communists took over in
Albania and pushed anti-American propaganda, most Albanians still loved the U.S.).

We Americans care about Kosovo because we can't resist helping the scrappy underdog
fighting for independence from a more powerful, oppressive nation. Turkey cares about
Kosovo (even more than about strengthening political relations with Serbia) because
Kosovo and Albania were the good, obedient subjects of the Ottoman Empire who not
only converted to Islam but stayed predominantly Muslim countries after getting
independence (as opposed to basically every other Balkan subject of the Ottoman
Empire).

The Iowan accent is typically considered very mild and appealing and one of the most
suited for television. To understand Iowa, I suggest you look up the video "Ashton
Kutcher talks about living in Iowa."

I'm not sure why it is, but every time I tried to picture Iowa, all I could see was this
really buff but well-endowed girl with silky, golden hair and perfect teeth who could
bench-press a double-decker bus while wearing a frilly dress and ribbons. My
description of Iowa's clothes in this chapter is meant to be a reference to her flag (it
looks just like the French flag but with a big eagle on it).

Scotcherroos are dessert bars, popular in Iowa, made from rice krispies, chocolate,
peanut butter, and butterscotch.

Lí-hó – Taiwanese "hello."
Mirëdita – Albanian "Good afternoon."
Po – Albanian for "yes."
As always, please correct me if I'm wrong.
Never, ever use the term "Šiptar" (or "shiptar"). It is a potent ethnic slur used against
Albanians in other Balkan countries. My use of it was not meant to offend, but to
educate on certain elements of socio-political culture in the Balkans.

Last year, China attempted to launch a propaganda campaign in the U.S. against our
current administration by inserting an article into a newspaper called the Des Moines
Register. Their target audience? The politically and economically powerful people of
Iowa (Iowa has the power to make or break a presidential election and contributes
enormously to the U.S. agricultural economy). The Chinese government tried to
convince Iowans – particularly farmers – that, due to the tariffs on Chinese products,
China would easily turn to other markets for trade and, subsequently, destroy U.S.
agricultural economy. However, in writing this propaganda piece, the Chinese
government forgot to take one thing into account...Iowans haven't been indoctrinated to
believe everything the Chinese government says without question the way many people
in China have.

Iowa was the second state to legalize same-sex marriage (Massachusetts was the first),
so I see her as a yaoi fan. But, Iowa, no, you can't ship your father with someone, that's
weird.

What's wrong with me? Now I'm shipping Kosovo and Liberia! How the hell did that
happen?!
Happy Arbor Day! Friday, April 26th! Remember to love nature and plant a tree for your tomorrow.

Also, my sincerest condolences to the people of France in regards to the fire that caused irreparable damage to the magnificent cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris.

"I feel so dirty about this," Kosovo muttered as she sat on the ground, leaning back against the wall that Taiwan and Iowa were peering over, spying covertly through their binoculars. "It's bad enough you want Mr. America and the Russian jerk to be friends, but this is way beyond what I'd consider acceptable."

"Don't be such a downer, Arjana," Taiwan said brightly. She had her binoculars pressed so tightly to her eyes that they almost seemed a part of her face. "What red-blooded girl doesn't like a bit of yaoi?"

"A girl who doesn't pry into other people's romantic lives," Kosovo said quietly.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. And what makes you so certain the tension between America and Russia is romantic in nature? Why can't it just be seething hatred?"

"My dad's not the 'seething hatred' kind of guy," said Iowa. "Sure, he'll throw some punches and get into a battle of insults, but he always bounces back and makes up with people. He and Mr. Japan repaired their friendship, even after betrayal and nuclear weapons were involved. And Dad really likes and respects Mr. Germany, despite two World Wars and some political disagreements. He likes to think of everyone as his friend, even people who hate him. That's why Dad's relationship with Russia is so perplexing."

"How so?" said Kosovo. "And why do you assume there is romantic potential?"

"Dad always forgives people. Always. Even if he brings up past conflicts, like with Mr. England and the Revolution or the War of 1812, he never actually holds it against them. And, even then, he only brings things like that up because, I have to admit, his 'hero complex' sometimes makes him claim whatever moral high ground he can find. He doesn't do that with Russia, though. It's so strange and complicated between them. They act like they're enemies and that they both have to constantly outmaneuver each other even though I don't think either one really knows why. They're equals in a way not even Dad and…and my mother were."

Kosovo and Taiwan flinched a bit as Iowa's tone became somber for those last few words. They knew not to press Iowa about her mother. In the few instances South had been mentioned during their Besties Club meetings, Iowa's mood would turn very dark and she never said anything good about the woman who'd brought her into the world. In fact, Iowa's friends had an unspoken theory that Iowa may well have hated her mother. That was why they tended to avoid the subject.
"Have I made my point? Good," Iowa said, not leaving any room for someone to answer. She turned back to staring through her binoculars, watching her father talking with Russia and a few other countries in a nearby restaurant. "Hmm, nothing yet. Too many people around, I guess. Aw, what?!"

That last exclamation was due to the sudden arrival of a massive 18-wheeler, which pulled in right in front of Iowa and Taiwan's perfect viewing space. Taiwan, not about to let anyone stand between her and potential yaoi, lifted herself up and over the wall. She then began pounding on the door of the truck's cab.

"Sir, could you please move your vehicle?" she exclaimed. It wasn't really a question.

The door flung open and Taiwan barely reared back to avoid getting hit. A pair of spurred boots were the first things to emerge before a sturdy figure dropped out onto the ground below in front of Taiwan. He was clearly a teenager, younger than all three of the girls in physical terms. Brown eyes stared hollowly at the small Asian country, who immediately felt unnerved.

"Do you know how long I have been on the road, little missy?" he said. "Seventy-two hours. I am only standing up right now because of coffee. The last thing I need, at this moment, is someone mouthing off at me about where I parked."

"What's going on?" Iowa said as she and Kosovo decided to intervene in the confrontation. "Mei, are you all righ- oh, hello, Isaac."

"Sis," the teenaged trucker greeted shortly. "I'll thank you to keep your friends from screaming at me when I am a hairsbreadth from going on a murderous rampage."

"Come on, Nebraska," said Iowa. "How was Taiwan supposed to know?" Nebraska rolled his eyes, but did not offer a rebuttal. "Anyway, what brings you to Topeka, little bro?"

"Delivery for Kansas. She wanted me to help her create some gardens. New Jersey is coming down with some flowers later this week, but I wanted to go ahead and deliver the saplings."

"Aww, that's so sweet," Iowa cooed, pinching Nebraska's cheek. "Nebraska and Kansas, like two birds of a feather or peas in a pod."

"Kindly take your hand off my face."

"But, wait, Kansas is planning to make gardens and she didn't think to tell me? I'm just as talented with plants as you and New Jersey are."

"It's not a competition, Sally. Anyhow, what're you ladies doing that requires me to move my truck?"

"Uhh…” Iowa shared a quick glance with Taiwan. "N-no reason."

Nebraska narrowed his eyes and leaned in as his older sister and her friends began to sweat nervously.

"Why must you always try to deceive me?" Nebraska said in a stern tone. "You know it's a sin to lie, sis. You'll make baby Jesus weep. And the corn will get angry at you."

"Iowa and Taiwan were spying on your father and Mr. Russia," Kosovo said, breaking under the weight of Nebraska's stare, earning betrayed looks from her friends. "They're supposed to be getting the two of them to be friends, again, but they've decided it's a good chance to create yaoi."

"What's a 'yaoi'?"
Before Kosovo could explain further, Iowa and Taiwan each slapped a hand over her mouth to stop her from explaining. Iowa loved her little brother, but he did not exactly share in the yaoi vision. Iowa may be fairly conservative, but Nebraska was an entity unto himself. He had exactly two counties which tended to lean towards the blue, and he did not really like having two sides to anything – it was why bicameral legislature and partisan politics did not last long on his turf.

"Well, Isaac, 'yaoi' is a Japanese term for…something girls and certain kinds of boys like," Iowa hedged, trying to avoid either lying or being too honest. Telling Nebraska the truth would probably kill him.

"Like what?" Nebraska said, still watching them with his unnerving gaze.

"It's…a form of artistic and literary media."

"Like comic books?"

"…Sometimes."

"Ah. So it's like Kansas's obsession with Superman, then?"

Iowa thought about the for a moment. Considering how Kansas had every issue of Superman ever printed, kept a cardboard cutout of Superman in her closet, and was still trying to figure out which of her towns Smallville was actually based on, the girl's manic obsession with the iconic superhero was pretty much on-par with the stalkerish nature of a hardcore fujoshi.

"Yes, exactly," said Iowa, her smile returning.

"So…let me see if I have this straight," Nebraska said, gently rubbing the side of his head as he mentally pieced things together. "You were spying on Father and Mr. Russia, because you were originally planning to get them to be friends, again, right?"

"Right."

"And then you got distracted by making girly comic books?"

"More or less correct," Taiwan added.

"And this requires me to move my truck?"

"If you would be so kind," said Iowa.

"Fine. I will move my truck…after I collect Father." Nebraska almost cracked a smile as he said that; the looks on the girls' faces were priceless. "He promised to help me plant the trees. A bit early for Arbor Day, but I'm not questioning the chance to help sustain nature. If you ladies will excuse me."

With that, he turned on his heel and began walking towards the restaurant, leaving a frazzled Iowa and Taiwan in his wake. Kosovo, sensing their moment of weakness, removed their hands from over her mouth.

"May we please go back, now?" Kosovo asked. "He's already disrupted your unhealthy voyeurism, so there's no reason to hang around, now."

"You underestimate us, Arjana," said Iowa. "The life of a yaoi fangirl is often an arduous one, filled with many obstacles and disappointments. And do you know how we cope with such difficulties?"

"Uh…By watching cat videos and eating unhealthy snacks?"
"No," said Taiwan firmly. She then paused for a moment and furrowed her brow in thought. "Well, actually, yes...usually. But only if we fail beyond a shadow of all reasonable doubt. And have we done that?"

"Is it too much to hope that the answer is 'yes'?" said Kosovo with a tired sigh.

"No," Iowa chimed in. "We are not beaten until we have at least one restraining order put out on us."

Kosovo groaned as she resigned herself to the grim destiny her friends were compelling her to join with them in achieving. She quietly sent up a prayer to Allah to give her strength in what she was doomed to endure in the name of friendship. Idly, she wished she could have gone with Yucatán; he had said something about helping Kansas search for the Dogman and the Pterosaur. Yucatán had always been a little adventurous in nature, always volunteering to look for lost ruins, mythic monsters, and extraterrestrial phenomena; usually, only the American states were associated with things like that, but Yucatán often joined in the fun with them (or, in this case, started up a search that Kansas hadn't even wanted but was too nice to say "no" to).

By now, the nations were certain they were well and truly used to the appearance of America's children.

So, when a teenage boy with short, light brown hair and stern, brown eyes walked into where many of the nations had stopped to have some lunch and addressed America as "Dad," they barely paid it more than a passing glance. America introduced the boy as Nebraska, "Isaac Jones" to use his human name, his hard-working and underappreciated thirty-seventh state. Nebraska was polite, though somewhat straight-laced, and dressed in very modest, tidy clothing that looked a little old-fashioned. Unlike many of his siblings, Nebraska did not look outstandingly like any of the countries (although, some countries later noted that, had Nebraska been a girl, he would probably have looked a tiny bit like Czech Republic).

After Nebraska was introduced, however, things started to get a little weird. It began with a simple inquiry about what Nebraska was there for. The boy went into a detailed explanation of the importance of trees and then trailed off on a tangent about his work.

"...And I do not just work as a trucker," he said evenly. "I also own and operate a farm, work for a call center, and do some part-time work at nine-one-one emergency services. Yet, you never hear about my accomplishments, because everyone thinks New York is so great for being 'artsy' and putting his money in business deals and California makes movies and Texas is so big and loud you can't help but pay attention to her. At least I have jobs that don't always depend on good luck...well, farming is a bit of a gamble when you take rain into account..."

He then somehow ended up talking about his strange hobbies, like making replicas of famous monuments out of old cars and making vaguely disturbing statues of things. Although, Italy seemed pleased when Nebraska gave him a miniature copy of his 'famous' sculpture Stile di Famiglia, which resembled a giant fork gathering up a bite of pasta.

Then someone made the mistake of asking Nebraska what he grew on his farm. The short answer: Corn. The long answer: Corn, and he grows it better and appreciates it more than Iowa ever did or could.

"It's just a stupid vegetable," Romano said impatiently. "I do not understand why you Americans care so much about it."
Nebraska shot him an inscrutable look.

"Corn is not 'just a vegetable,'" Nebraska replied, still in his unnervingly calm voice. "It is sacred. It is one of the Three Sisters, the ancient sustenance of my ancestors. Corn is the reason we live. It is part of us and we are part of it."

He then pulled out an ear of corn from somewhere – yet again, another of those mysterious abilities of personifications – and began to mutter to it. A few nations cautiously backed away when Nebraska said something which sounded distinctly like "must appease the corn with sacrifices."

"Uh, say, kiddo," America spoke up at long last. "Didn't you need my help with planting those trees for Kansas's new gardens?"

"Ah, yes, of course," Nebraska said, tucking the ear of corn away. "Thank you, Father. I apologize for getting so distracted."

Everyone resisted an odd shudder as America and Nebraska walked past them and out the door. The state seemed nice enough, very dignified and well-spoken, if a little chatty. But there just seemed to be some unspoken malevolence that followed him around, as if he was hiding some dark secret beneath a pleasant and inoffensive exterior.

Meanwhile, as America and Nebraska planted trees, talked about corn recipes, and drank Kool-Aid, Iowa and Taiwan were putting some finishing touches on their first official plot in their yaoi vision.

"So we're in agreement," said Iowa. "We use the old 'invite to dinner' trick. We send a message to my dad, saying one of his colleagues wants to meet him for dinner, and then we send an invite to Russia with a similar message to get him to the same restaurant."

"That sounds like the setup of an episode from a terrible sitcom," said Kosovo, who was lying on the couch looking completely worn-out.

"Which means it's fool-proof!" Taiwan exclaimed. "If television has taught us anything, it's that everything turns out for the best by the end of the half-hour."

"This isn't television, though. Or a yaoi fanfic. This is real life."

"Yeesh, Arjana," said Iowa. "You're starting to get as melodramatic as my brother Washington."

"I hope your brother, at least, knows not to interfere in your father's personal life."

"No. He usually just cusses Dad out and whines about no one understanding his tortured soul."

"Why couldn't I have gone with Kansas and Yucatán?" Kosovo said to herself. "Kansas said she was going to make another giant ball of twine once they got back from the monster hunt."

"...We have to find a way to include an aquarium scenario," Taiwan added. "No manga date is ever complete unless there is an aquarium involved in some way."

Kosovo groaned to herself and pulled out her cellphone. She began shooting off a few messages to her brother to assure him that, yes, she was still fine and, no, he didn't need to beat anyone's head in for any reason. Although, she was briefly tempted to reveal to him what her friends were forcing her to be involved in; however, she stopped herself at the last moment as she had no desire to cause a situation that would involve getting poor Kansas's nice living room messed up.
She was distracted from her musings and her friends' incessant yaoi fangirling by a new message. The contact identification revealed it to be Liberia, asking her how she was doing and if she had any suggestions about construction of their respective embassies. Kosovo's cheeks pinked a little but she quickly sent back a reply. A conversation soon started up and Kosovo found a way of distracting herself from what Taiwan and Iowa were planning.

Unbeknownst to Kosovo, her friends had noticed her sudden lack of grumbling and were sharing sly grins with each other. Kosovo had no idea that, once they were finished with their yaoi plans, they intended to begin work on their friend's love life.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The alternate title for this chapter is "Cornhusker."

New Jersey, Iowa, and Nebraska are members of the Garden Trio because they are all known for work with plants. New Jersey is the "Garden State," Nebraska started Arbor Day, and Iowa has been home to some great achievements in botany (Iowa was once the site of George Washington Carver's research with plants like the peanut).

Kansas is very proud to be the home of Superman from DC Comics. Pretty much every small town claims to be the inspiration for Smallville (the town where Superman grew up), and one city, Hutchinson, actually changed its name to "Smallville" for a day. Kansas is also home to the world's largest ball of twine.

I don't know why, but I imagined Yucatán as being an adventurous spirit who likes to join the states on searches for weird and potentially dangerous phenomena.

The Dogman and the Pterosaur are two of the very few monsters that have been noted in Kansas monster-lore. There have also been Bigfoot sightings and some places in Kansas have made provisions for potential zombie apocalypse.

Nebraska has a sizable Czech population. It ranks in the top five states for number of Czech-Americans (behind Texas, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota) and has the highest Czech-American population percentage of any state.

The 911 emergency service was first implemented in Nebraska.

Nebraska is home to "Car-henge" (a replica of Stonehenge made out of cars) and some weird statues like the Stile di Famiglia.

The "Three Sisters" originally cultivated by the Native Americans are corn (maize), squash, and beans.

Nebraska is where Kool-Aid was invented. Random add-on: It's also one of the two states where spam is produced (the other being Minnesota).

I gave Nebraska the human name "Isaac" after a character from Stephen King's "Children of the Corn," a horror story about the fictional town of Gatlin, Nebraska, in which a group of children sacrifice everyone over the age of eighteen to their pseudo-biblical corn god.

Always be nice to Nebraskans. We all know those Corn People are secretly plotting to...
recruit us to their corn cult and we don't want to make them mad. Just like how the Canadians are making their own plans to take over the world through a scheme involving maple syrup and free healthcare.

Yes, I was sleep-deprived when I wrote this.
The teenage boy stepped out of the banged-up, old Greyhound bus, dragging a worn-out duffel bag with him.

He coughed a bit as a cloud of dust trailed out behind the departing bus, but brushed off his grey coat and proceeded on his way up the street. Ordinarily, he would have taken a less noxious form of transport, like his bicycle or electric car, but he wasn't certain he would get there in time to intercept his father if he took the bike and his car was having some problems, recently (he would have taken a plane, but he was still on the no-fly list for reasons best not mentioned). He glared under the intensity of the blinding sunlight, silently cursing its warmth and brightness. Part of him wished that he could experience sunlight as often as some of his other siblings, but the near-constant rainfall of his own land did more accurately reflect his general mood.

At least visiting the Midwest wasn't nearly as bad as when he visited some of his siblings on the east coast. There were only so many times he could stand being told to "get a job, ya lazy bum" and that he must have lost a bet to be dressed the way he was before he started to get irritated.

Of course, the happy, cheerful, overly-friendly attitude that reigned over the Midwest was a little grating, too. They should all feel ashamed of themselves for even existing, just like he did.

"Little Brother!"

He froze in his tracks as he heard Iowa's voice. There was a sibling he couldn't understand for the life of him. She was always stalking gay men to sate her yaoi fetish, but she would go off on some cisgender, heteronormative rant against him for challenging gender roles and promoting LGBTTQIAAP awareness. His running theory was that all the chemical residue from the pesticides on the corn she ate must have messed with her brain over the years, which was why he stuck to all organic vegetables, various healthy grains, beer, and coffee.

"How's it going at the west coast hippie club?" Iowa said with a wide smile.

"I'm hoping to transition to solely gender-neutral language in my state within the next year," he said. "And I finally made it legal to register X as a gender on birth certificates."

"Uh...huh." Iowa drawled with a clear note of unease. "Have fun with that. Anyway, while you've been teaching little boys to act like little girls, me and my friends have been having real fun."

"Trying to set up gay couples for your own amusement is hardly what I'd call 'fun.' Frankly, I find the thought of fetishizing someone else's sexual preferences to be extremely distasteful."

"Now who's being an intolerant fascist, Washington?"

"You're not going about gender politics the right way!"
"And what is the 'right' way, Wash? Doing everything you say because you clearly know so much more than I do and I obviously can't be trusted to make my own decisions."

"You know, Iowa, sarcasm has a sibling called 'shut the fuck up.'"

Iowa clicked her tongue and then gave her brother a serious look.

"Anyway, Wash," she said. "My friends and I are trying to set Dad up on a date."

"I seem to recall we all swore off trying to set Dad up on dates after that disastrous attempt with Vietnam," said Washington. "I'm certain Dad still has the rope burns."

"Oh, please, this is nothing like that. We all learned our lesson from that experience."

"Yeah, and it only took hundreds of thousands of deaths to drive the point home."

"Excuse me? I'm not the one who went around spitting on veterans and picketing funerals."

"Oh, let that live forever. I don't see you calling out Ohio for protesting the Vietnam War and he was even more vocal than I was."

"Ohio suffered enough from what happened at Kent State. And you ought to be ashamed of yourself for making light of those protests."

"You're the one treating it as if we didn't do anything wrong. What country are you and your friends trying to set Dad up for another war with now? North Korea? Iran? Ha, maybe even Russia, perhaps?"

Washington began to laugh coldly until he saw the guilty expression on Iowa's face.

"No," he said. "No. No fucking way. Russia? Are you out of your fucking mind, Iowa?!!"

"It's a logical choice," she defended softly.

"No, it's not. After all the shit that went down in the Cold War, you want to set Dad up with that fucker? It was bad enough when Russia was perverting the ideals of communism to promote a totalitarian regime, but now that giant asshole is rigging our elections, and you think it's a good idea to set him up with Dad?"

"What is wrong with you?" Iowa said, furrowing her brows. "Don't tell me you've bought into the whole 'Russian collusion' scam. We've been over this, there is absolutely no proof that the president was in any way involved with the Russian government."

"It's not just about that, Sally! Do you have any idea how Alaska is going to react if she finds out what you're doing?"

"What do you care about how Alaska reacts?"

"Are you joking?! Have you been completely blind to how psychotic and vicious that little girl is, this whole time? And, even then, you can't possibly know what it's like having her follow you around making disturbing comments about reunifying the Pacific Northwest region. I have nightmares just thinking about it and I know, for certain, that Yukon won't come within a hundred feet of her since the border dispute issue."

It was a little-known incident, but, back in the early twentieth century, an argument over borders in the wake of the Yukon Gold Rush had resulted in little Alaska chasing her cousin with a knife.
during a playdate. Washington had helped his cousin hide in a kitchen cabinet while the older states talked Alaska down. Canada had been angry with America for not taking the matter seriously, but he’d been even more furious with England when the island nation had arbitrated the boundary dispute issue in America’s favor (clearly showing his old favoritism towards America even though he hadn’t known about what happened between the two children).

"Oh, calm down," said Iowa dismissively. "While Alaska might not be thrilled about this, I'm sure it won't be as bad as you make it out to be. And, anyway, I thought you'd be pleased with my decision. Aren't you the one always glorifying communism? Well, now you can get direct instruction in it from the former Mr. Soviet Union, himself."

"I already told you," Washington said in frustration. "The Soviet Union wasn't real communism. It was totalitarianism masking itself in the guise of communism. If a communist regime had been properly instituted, it wouldn't have collapsed the way it did."

"I call bullcrap on that, but whatever floats your little pinko commie boat."

"But it's true!"

"What happened to you, Wash? You used to be a rugged right-winger who loved his guns, hated government, and wrestled with Bigfoot. And now you act like every entitled, liberal wuss leeching off the public teat and demanding money from Daddy."

Washington practically snarled at his sister and shoved her out of the way.

"You can't keep denying reality, Wash," Iowa called after him. "Ignoring the problem will only make things worse."

"Fuck off," he snapped back at her, fighting back angry tears in his eyes. He hated when his siblings did that, always trying to pick him apart to find out what was 'wrong' with him. "You don't know a single, fucking thing about me. And, if you keep pushing, I'm going to tell Dad exactly what you're up to."

"You wouldn't dare," Iowa growled, eyes narrowing.

"I'll tell him right now. He's working on making Kansas some new gardens, isn't he? Shouldn't be that hard to find."

Washington turned and began walking away when he found himself wrestled to the ground by his older sister. Iowa might like to act like a delicate, poised young lady, but damn it if she didn't have a tackle like the meanest, toughest linebacker in the NFL.

"Don't try me, Wash," she said coldly. "I am not some government stooge you can bully and this isn't an anarchic hellhole like Seattle."

"I'm not afraid of you, Iowa," Washington replied. "All you've got going for you is your stupid corn."

"Hmm, let's put it to a test of strength, then. Gender politics and fifteen-dollar minimum wage versus old-fashioned American agriculture."

America wiped the sheen of sweat from his brow and gave a satisfied sigh as he took in the sight of the trees he and Nebraska had finished planting. It was a lot of work and it wouldn't look complete until New Jersey arrived with the flowers she was bringing, but it was an excellent start.
"Whew, nothing like getting your hands dirty and planting something in the ground, right, kiddo?" America said as he wiped his hands against his faded jeans to get the dirt off them.

"Indeed, Father," Nebraska replied evenly. "This earth is essential to our life and we must assuredly strengthen it. For the day of reckoning is nigh upon us and we shall be judged for our acts and-"

"Ooh, ice cream truck!"

America pointed towards a box-shaped vehicle playing a tinkling song from the speaker mounted on the top of it. As his father chased after the ice cream truck, Nebraska pursed his lips at such an undignified display for such a ridiculous aim – besides, he doubted Kansas's ice cream vendors had Nebraska's favorite flavor of sweet corn ice cream. Still, he followed dutifully after his father and waited patiently for him to get his post-work treat.

"Want something, Isaac?" America said.

"No, thank you, Father," Nebraska replied.

Once America had his ice cream, father and son sat down on a nearby public bench and began to chat.

"So, what are you and your colleagues discussing this week?" Nebraska asked.

"Well, during the first meeting, it initially started out as an investigation into how you states exist," America explained before frowning. "Then things devolved into an interrogation about our family's history and there were some questions about South that I just don't know if I can answer."

Nebraska looked searchingly at his father. South was not Nebraska's mother, as he'd been 'born' after the Civil War, so he was not burdened with as much of the unease surrounding the North-South divide as his older siblings. In fact, many of his people had been rather removed from the fighting, as a whole, save for the 1st Nebraska Infantry and some cavalry groups which had been very active in the Union forces at a number of major battles in the east (though no battles had been fought in the Nebraska Territory, itself). The only real thing Nebraska could remember about the Civil War impacting him directly was when his people were trying to decide on his capital. Omaha had originally been the big seat of power, but there was a move to make Lancaster the official capital, instead, so Senator J. N. H. Patrick made arrangements to change Lancaster's name to "Lincoln." Officially, it was meant to honor the president, who had been assassinated a short time earlier, but the senator had hoped to play off the Confederate sympathies of the people living along the Platte River - it didn't work, of course.

That was pretty much it.

"Well, I have neither love nor hatred for a woman I never met," said Nebraska. "So I have no means of ascertaining the full extent of how her betrayal affected you. I will say it was highly inappropriate for the other nations to ask about something so personal, but, perhaps, you should consider confiding in someone."

America gave Nebraska a shocked expression, though there was a distinct tinge of fear in the nation's eyes at the thought of telling anyone about the internal anguish he had carried for over a century.

"Just consider it, Father," said Nebraska. "If you don't, I have every certainty that one of my older brothers or sisters will no longer be able to restrain themselves and everything will come out in the worst possible light."

"Maybe you're right," America said with a tired sigh. "Maybe…maybe I've been holding onto this
for too long. I just…even though she's gone, it still feels like I need to protect her. The others probably already have their assumptions about her now that they know she was the Confederacy. Even the ones who didn't know about the war have likely Googled it, by now, and think she's some kind of monster."

Nebraska held his tongue on that. From the way some of the other states described her, South did come across as rather unpleasant…manipulative, greedy, vicious, and likely insane, too. Then again, only the Northern states ever really got to voice their opinions of South aloud without being accused of bias…which did not actually make sense, as they were as biased against her as the Southern states were biased in her favor. The whole thing was enough to give genuinely impartial onlookers a headache.

"And, worst of all," America continued, worry clearly marking his features. "What if the other nations start pitying me for what happened? I can take the biting comments and death threats, but having them feel sorry for me because I was too weak to stop her from breaking away and then couldn't stop the war without killing her…I don't know if I could stand that."

"Beware of the sin of pride, Father," Nebraska said with an eerily calm tone. "Pride goeth before the fall. If you concern yourself too much with what they will think of you for past mistakes you have endeavored to fix, things which were not entirely of your own doing, those feelings can be used to harm you. You do not need to bare your heart and soul to them, but show them, instead, that you do not consider yourself infallible and god-like. That you are just as capable of being an imperfect sinner as the rest of them."

America thought about his son's words for a moment before offering a small smile and gently ruffling Nebraska's hair.

"Aww, such an adorable scene this is being," said a familiar, almost childish voice.

"Hello, Russia," America said, rolling his eyes that the communist yeti-man had intruded into yet another personal conversation.

"Small-talk? Really?"

"Is there something the matter, my friend? Is it not the custom to share talk about the weather and mildly amusing current events?"

"Dude, what is your deal, lately?" America said, shooting to his feet and glaring suspiciously at Russia. "Why have you been acting all nice to me? You're plotting world domination again, aren't you?"

"Nyet. Why all the suspicion, Amerika? I have done nothing recently to merit such hostility. If I were truly a threat to you, right now, why would I bother acting nice when I could target your family?"

"Because you know that, if you hurt my children, my siblings, or my nieces and nephews that I would bring down the most epically heroic battle of all time."

"And he'd win, too," Nebraska said, a dark shadow falling over his face. "We have the corn. The corn will always take what is rightfully its own."

Russia quirked an eyebrow up and gave America a vaguely unnerved look.

"And people say that I am creepy," Russia muttered to himself.
"What do you want, Russia?" America said with an annoyed sigh. "I honestly cannot believe that you're just here to chit-chat."

Russia smiled again and sat down on the bench and motioned for America and Nebraska to sit back down, too. The father and son did so, albeit with clear hesitation.

"It is very peaceful out here," Russia said. "I had not realized how much difference just being away from your big cities there can be."

"Topeka is a big city," America said.

"Well, for Kansas, anyway," Nebraska muttered.

"You never showed me much of your land when I came to visit in the past," Russia continued. "Only the northeast…and Alaska, of course."

America tensed.

"If you think I'm going to give Alaska back to you, you have another thing coming," America said defensively.

"Nyet, you misunderstand, Amerika," said Russia. "I would not dream of separating little Alaska from her father. Besides, there is very little left of me with her."

"I guess so," America responded thoughtfully. "When she was born, she looked just like you, you know."

"Is that correct?"

"Yeah. Remember back when we signed the agreement?"

"October 18th, 1867. I am remembering it clearly. There was a formal party after the signing of the treaty, but you came in late and seemed very unwell."

"Considering I'd just given birth, I would say it was understandable."

Russia blinked at America as realization dawned on his face.

"So, Alaska has been around that long, then," he said.

"She's only a little bit younger than I am," Nebraska added. "I was born in March of the same year."

"If she has been around so long, why is she still so little?"

"I'm still not sure, myself," said America. "She's grown a bit since she was given statehood, but it's almost like she doesn't want to grow up. Anyway, after you left and most of your people pulled out of her land, Alaska's appearance literally changed overnight and she got the looks she has now."

"Including those tattoos on her face?"

"Uh…actually, let's just say that's what happens if you leave your daughter with super-traditionalist older sisters who believe the only way to keep people safe from demon spirits is with face tattoos. My family in the northwest can be pretty hardcore."

"Da, yes, I have encountered some of your family up there when I first secured the territory. Some of them tore a few good pieces out of me, even with my superior weapons and numbers."
"Well, that's what happens when you try to fight someone on their own turf. I'm sure you would agree after how many times people failed to defeat you because of weather and your people's knowledge of their own terrain."

Nebraska watched the exchange with keen interest as his father and Russia became so absorbed in their banter, which turned into a detailed discussion of military strategy, that they seemed to forget he was there. So, that was why Iowa had been planning to get their father and Russia to be friends again. It was clear to see that, when they weren't biting out harsh words over political issues, the two powers genuinely seemed to relax and open up to each other. Perhaps it went along with the old saying of opposites attracting, or maybe the two nations weren't as different as they liked to think (though Nebraska would always say that his father was better, because, well, freedom…not to mention the power of corn in securing the U.S.'s supremacy over all – because corn would conquer the world, no matter what their maple-sucking cousins up north claimed).

Maybe reigniting their old friendship was a good idea, after all. And Nebraska had thought Iowa incapable of those.

"Get back here, pinko!"

Ah, there was the shrill voice he hated for no discernible reason other than the fact that its owner dared challenge his title as the Cornhusker state. Sure enough, Iowa soon put in an appearance as she chased after a very harassed-looking Washington. Not that Nebraska particularly cared about what Iowa did to Washington; frankly, as far as Nebraska was concerned, that entitled brat deserved whatever punch Iowa could throw at him.

"Oh, not again," America grumbled. "Why can't he stop provoking everyone?"

"What is going on?" said Russia.

"Washington's gotten on someone's nerves, again. It happens. Excuse me, I'll be right back."

America stood up and casually walked into the path of the two states, catching Washington as he barreled into him and leveling Iowa with such an unamused look that she skidded to a halt that left marks on the asphalt beneath her feet.

"D-Daddy!" Iowa said nervously. "Wash and I were just…playing tag."

America continued to give her that stern look that none of the states ever enjoyed seeing. It was the look that said he could see right through any bullshit the states tried to spin and that, if they persisted in lying to him, it would only make things worse.

"I do have eyes, Sally," America said calmly. "They may not have twenty-twenty vision, but they can still see needless fighting."

"It's not my fault," Iowa protested. "Wash was being a jerk."

"And you were being a psycho-bitch," Washington added, "But I didn't piledrive you into the dirt. Seriously, Dad, I think we should just sell her to the NWA, so she can be with people who understand her."

"I should be offended by that," said Iowa. "But pro-wrestlers are far better company than you've ever been, Wash."

"And here I thought everyone considered you the friendly one in the family."
"I am, but I also have low tolerance for stupidity."

"Dad," Washington whined. "She's bullying me again."

"Why can't you guys just get along?" America said tiredly.

Iowa and Washington both clearly misinterpreted their father's rhetorical question as a serious one and began loudly exclaiming their mutual reasons for disliking each other. Meanwhile, Russia and Nebraska had both walked over to where the argument was taking place to see what was going on.

Russia looked curiously at Washington. The boy was rather lanky and thin, with silvery-blonde hair that had been shaved along the sides with a heavy fringe in the front, and thin, dark brown eyes that had a flat, almost dispassionate tone. He wore very shabby, out-of-fashion clothes, including a patched-up wool coat, worn-out tennis shoes, and a green scarf that appeared to be unraveling; around his neck, he wore a necklace with a charm which looked distinctly like a pentagram.

However, what was most striking was that Washington bore some facial similarities to Russia, himself, though younger and thinner. Russia mentally went over where the state of Washington was, and, recalling the state's position in the Pacific Northwest, remembered how parts of the state had once belonged to Russia's old territorial claims (as Russia had claimed all of the northern Pacific coast, even extending his reach to California; though sections such as Washington and Oregon were never actually colonized) until America and England both took over in the region as the fur trade expanded.

"…I can't remember, Wash. Are you Communist or anarchist, this month?" Iowa said with a cold note of condescension.

"All right, that's it," said Washington. "I get enough of this kind of abuse from Oregon, I don't need it from anyone else." He then paused, huffed, and scowled at Iowa before adding, "And, for the record, I don't see anything wrong with considering the Communist political structure a viable possibility."

Russia actually made a strange, choking sound that drew everyone's attention.

"You…" Russia stammered. "One of Amerika's states. You are actually having no problem with Communism?"

Before Washington could respond, Iowa stepped in with her own two cents.

"Of course," she said. "Washington's been a pinko Commie for ages now. He just won't admit it."

"Shut up, Iowa," Washington said in a warning tone.

"I think Idaho summed it up best." She then pulled out her cellphone. "I even recorded what he said for posterity. Just listen." She clicked a button and a gruff voice was heard.

"My brother, Washington, is not a Communist," the recorded voice said. "He may be a liar, a pig, an idiot, a Communist, but he is not a porn star."

"Oh, that is just like Spuds to say that," Washington growled. "Just because I'm progressive and want to consider alternate means of political structure, you want to tar and feather me in your McCarthy-ist witch-hunt. That is so typical of you corporate shills, always shooting down people who don't march in step with your outdated, Conservative ideologies and hypocritically pretending to be righteous while turning a blind eye to discrimination and exploitation."

"…Okay, everything you just said in that sentence is BS," said Iowa.
"I do not normally agree with someone who categorizes deep fried butter as a legitimate food group," said Nebraska. "But, I must admit, Iowa is quite correct. Your opinion of us is rather ridiculous and is, itself, fairly hypocritical."

"Dudes, let's not get into a political rant," America said. "How's 'bout we take a few steps back and-"

"Shut up, Dad," Washington snapped. "Not everything needs to be solved by you interfering. Go on, then, Isaac. Tell me what makes you think you're so much better than me."

"It is not that I consider myself better, only that you are rather short-sighted and as narrow-minded as the people you claim to oppose," Nebraska said calmly. "For instance, let us take the case of your approach to environmentalism."

"Yeah, what about it?!")

That was a rather tender subject to start with. Washington was very proud of his contributions to 'saving the Earth.' He often sneered at people who only relied on recycling to help improve environmental conditions.

"Well, to start with, let us simply examine your use of an electric car."

"Let me guess," Washington said with a derisive snort, "rejecting fossil fuels is depriving hard-working oil companies of money, so now their CEOs can't afford solid gold toilets anymore."

Nebraska gave him a flat, unamused look and proceeded.

"Actually, I am far more concerned that you see no issue in supporting an industry that relies on slave labor to keep it operating," he said.

Washington blinked.

"…What?"

"The fact that you have not even bothered to research the impact of endorsing the electric car industry also further underlines your hypocritical ignorance," Nebraska continued. "The lithium-ion battery in your precious electric car is made using a substance known as 'cobalt.' The cobalt is mined chiefly in African countries, most notably the Democratic Republic of Congo, by people who are more-or-less held at gunpoint and ordered to work in unsafe conditions for little to no pay – and, if that weren't bad enough, a large portion of this forced labor is comprised of children."

Washington's face could have been carved from stone.

"Is that too dark of a topic for you, Little Brother?" Nebraska pressed on. "What about your fixation on quinoa in your new vegan fad? While you proudly go on about your healthy food choice, you and other consumers of quinoa in this country are driving up the prices of quinoa in Peru and Bolivia to the point that the people who once relied on quinoa as an essential food source can no longer afford it as it is more profitable for the farms to sell it here. As a result, you are perpetuating a poverty crisis and driving out additional plant cultivation to promote a quinoa monoculture. The same can be said of asparagus cultivation depleting vital water sources or of soya being a primary cause for deforestation in South America. To say nothing of the fact that importing cheaper agricultural products from abroad undermines the agricultural production of states such as myself, Iowa, Kansas, and the other Midwesterns. Even you, yourself, rely heavily on agriculture, Washington; so, in a way, you are participating in your own demise, and-"

"Uh, Isaac," Iowa said, her expression faintly concerned. "I…I think you broke him."
Washington did, indeed, look as though his brain had completely shut down.

"I doubt I killed any more brain cells than his marijuana addiction already has," said Nebraska with a shrug.

"Wash?" America said worriedly. "Kiddo? You okay?"

"Amerika," said Russia with a confused tilt of his head, "I am not understanding. Do your children really believe Communism has anything to do with saving the environment? If I had cared about saving nature while as part of Soviet Union, I never would be dumping that nuclear waste in Lake Karachay along with the bodies of workers who died from radiation poisoning. I would be dumping nuclear waste in one place and bodies in another."

"That is a fair point," America said with a thoughtful frown, completely ignoring the now shocked and horrified expression on Washington's face. "When you recycle, you do want to separate organic material from inorganic, because the organic can usually just go right into a composting heap while the inorganic requires special handling to be reused."

While America and Russia once more became absorbed in their own conversation, Iowa and Nebraska carted away their nearly catatonic younger brother, leaving the two great nations to their own devices.

The other states kept their distance from Washington as he took over Kansas's living room, turning out the lights and wrapping himself up in a blanket whilst sobbing quietly.

Everything that had been said had proven far too much. Iowa was feeling rather contrite about pushing him so far, knowing that he took his devotion to saving the world very seriously; though Nebraska, by contrast, felt Washington got what was coming to him and considered his brooding to be nothing more than a pathetic cry for attention.

Washington had had some problems for a while, though. He'd never been especially cheerful, but his demeanor had gradually darkened over the years, mostly towards the end of the eighties and into the nineties. The family had suspected something was troubling him when he introduced the world to grunge music and started neglecting his personal appearance and work ethic. They had all hoped it was just a phase, like when the Southern states went through a dark Gothic period following the Civil War.

And then Twilight came along and messed Washington up even worse.

While thousands of screaming fans touted the novel as an epic paranormal romance masterpiece, Washington was left with, what he considered, the bitter taste of fame purchased at the price of his dignity. Ever since that book was published, Washington was known, first and foremost, as the setting of Twilight. Any other claim to prestige was lost in a sea of vapid teenage wish-fulfillment and glitter.

It was enough to drive anyone into depression. Well, that's what the other states all thought, at least.

"Wash, are you okay?" Iowa said.

Washington just pulled the blanket tighter around himself. Iowa and Nebraska cautiously backed out of the room and turned to look at each other.

"All right, now I feel terrible," said Iowa. "I think we crossed a boundary we shouldn't have."
"I see nothing wrong," Nebraska said with a shrug. "Simple-minded people always overreact when they have their worldviews challenged with honest facts."

"So, if I said Kansas City steaks are better than Omaha…?"

"Continue in that line of thought and you will be eating your steaks through a mechanical straw."

Iowa rolled her eyes but threw a concerned look towards Washington.

"I think he needs some help," she said. "I'm gonna call Clara. She's the only person who ever seems to get along with him."

"Unless you count Alaska." Of course, if we called Alaska, we'd soon be divested of our skin for upsetting Washington, Nebraska mentally added.

Washington was so enveloped in the blanket that it was making it increasingly difficult to breathe. Washington didn't care, though, and simply stared into the darkness that enveloped him in its choking warmth.

Over and over in his mind, Nebraska's damning comments played, marking him as a perpetrator of injustice he'd long ago sought to fight. As a child, echoes of the dark history of his land tormented him in the night… the Whitman Massacre, the various wars with the native tribes, the rampant abuse of liquor, gambling, and prostitution as a means of growing the economies of cities like Seattle during its early days, the Great Seattle Fire, and the exploitation of minority groups in the labor force. All of it had haunted him since the moment of his birth, and subsequent issues had driven into the boy a sense of melancholy and increasing feelings of worthlessness and shame.

In both the World Wars, Washington had thrown himself into making more and more machines and weapons to support the Allies and to give himself a purpose, going so far as to act against his own ethical code by putting the finishing touches on the atomic bombs and even making, with his own hands, the plane which dropped the bomb on Nagasaki. A little part of his soul died when that bomb made contact and he was left with a whole slew of new nightmares, compounding with the guilt he already felt about the mass-interment of Japanese-Americans he'd participated in (he could barely look himself in the mirror, as the eyes looking back at him resembled the eyes of the people he'd hurt). To add insult to injury, when the wars ended, he was left spiraling into economic decline as he put so much focus into creating means of ending life that he forgot to take care of the lives he needed to protect.

He then began doing everything he could to keep himself from falling back into the misery he'd experienced in the Great Depression by building, expanding, and progressing as fast as he could, driving himself to exhaustion and causing himself a great deal of mental anguish which he'd tried to numb with recreational drugs. By the time the seventies ended, he'd head-diving into counter-culture so hard that he wasn't sure who or what he even was.

There were times he so hated himself for what he had done in the past and what he had become in the present that he wished he was human so that he could put an end to it all. He felt like a disgrace to his family and a disappointment to his father… his father, who had had such high expectations of him that he'd named his son after his first and favorite president. His brothers and sisters always seemed to look down their noses at him; they might not have always voiced their dislike openly, but Washington could just tell they hated him and wanted him gone.

He'd tried to make it happen. Several times, in fact.
He just felt so empty and broken inside that he attempted to make it all go away. Hanging, shooting, slitting his wrists, overdosing, throwing himself into Mount St. Helens, starving himself until he couldn't stand it...he'd tried them all, but nothing had worked. He still lived when all he wanted to do was fade into the blank nothingness.

"Well, is that any way to greet your favorite sister?" a cheerful voice said before Washington found himself yanked from the confines of his blanket and met with the smiling face and silver eyes of Colorado. "Don't fade out on me, David."

David. David Douglas Jones. His human name. Only Colorado ever bothered using it. To everyone else, he was 'Washington' or just 'Wash.'

"Hey, Clara," Washington replied. "What brings you here?"

"Well, I was on my way to Arizona's to do some bungee-jumping into the Grand Canyon, but I got a message from Sally that you were feeling kinda down," said Colorado. "So, I dropped everything and came right over."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Course I did! What kinda big sister would I be if I didn't make time for family in need of my presence? I would've brought some of my personal stash, too, but you know how sensitive Kansas is. Wouldn't want to trigger her asthma by filling her house with smoke."

"It's not like it cheers me up, anyway," Washington said morosely. "All it does is get me to normal."

"I did bring something else that might cheer you up."

Colorado gave a whistle and her pack of dogs bounded into the room and immediately made themselves comfortable around the two states. Washington couldn't fight the small, tearful smile that managed to break across his lips as he nuzzled against the warm fur of a large German Shepherd.

"I'm surprised you didn't bring your own pack with you," said Colorado. "Lord knows I rarely see you or Oregon without a bunch of precious pups."

Washington winced.

"That's actually why I came here," he said. "I kinda, sorta used up my allowance to send my dogs to a fancy grooming place and then used what was left to buy a bus ticket out here to ask Dad for some more cash. I would've just called to ask him, but you know he's less stingy if you ask him in-person. Not like that makes any difference; no way is he gonna give me anything, now."

"David," Colorado said, worry tingling her tone. "You can't keep doing this to yourself. If you needed help, you just had to ask me. And, if you're in trouble, you know Daddy will help you out."

Washington seemed even more upset by that. Colorado could see the pain, guilt, and embarrassment he was hiding in those dark eyes. As rebellious as he seemed to be, Washington was still very much his father's son. He hated being seen as weak by asking for help, even when he needed it, and tried to hide inner pain by acting out. He didn't like being seen as ungrateful, lazy, or greedy, but he still had a certain amount of entitlement from being spoiled as a child – America had a tendency to be too doting with his children, at times, which had consequently left a number of them with undeserved feelings of superiority.

"Hey, this is getting kinda heavy," said Colorado. "How 'bout we do something fun? Like play Oregon Trail?"
"I dunno, Clara," said Washington. "Last time we played that, our entire wagon died of dysentery."

Colorado reached into the bag Washington had left beside the couch and pulled out his laptop (it was brand-new and already plastered in political stickers).

"Fine, one game," Washington conceded.

"Sweet! Maybe afterwards, I can help you with those colored hair-streaks you wanted. Did you decide on blue or green?"

"Green. Skookum told me it was a better color on me."

"How is Skookum doing, by the way?"

"He's okay. Says that the cryptozoologists and wannabe monster-hunters are really bugging him, though. Especially Idaho. You'd think that, by now, people would've realized that Bigfoot just wants to be left alone."

Author's Note: I would also like to mention to any viewers of my Deviantart account that I have uploaded some new character designs for the U.S. territories, the Canadian provinces and territories, and the Mexican states and Mexico, herself.

Also, it turns out I've been making a dumbass-level mistake throughout writing this fic. I've been referring to the Republic of Ireland as "Southern Ireland," even though it would only make sense for her to be called "Southern Ireland" prior to her gaining independence to differentiate her from her twin brother Northern Ireland. I have, therefore, gone back and corrected this and I apologize to any Irish readers I may have annoyed in making such a stupid mistake. Please let me know if there are any places I haven't fixed this or if I do it again.

Washington state has actually been predominantly conservative for a long time, with the only real clusters of liberalism being in cities like Olympia and Seattle. But this has been steadily changing as the city populations go up and the state has been voting largely in the blue for a while.

There is actually an ice cream place in Nebraska which sells corn-flavored ice cream.

I've often wondered if the states that weren't really involved much in the Civil War watch the antagonism between the North and South and wonder what the hell they should even say, because it just did not have the same effect on them as it did further east (I can only wonder how Hawaii and Alaska feel about it).

Washington is deeply internally conflicted. On the one side, he has his rough, untamable, Wildman survivalist side (Eastern Washington), and, on the other, he has the city liberal side (Western Washington) which is taking over his mind. I also think he's deeply insecure that he will never live up to the name his father gave him (after all, being named after George Washington has got to put a lot of pressure on a kid, especially a state). The state also has a high rate of depression and suicide (odd, because they also have a high life expectancy) and have legalized assisted suicide (under
condition of terminal illness with a time-span of six months).

Washington wears a pentagram necklace because it is home to the Aquarian Tabernacle Church, the largest Wiccan church in the country. Hence, why Washington is also a member of the Magic Trio among the states (along with Rhode Island and Louisiana; I believe I mentioned that Kentucky is not one of them because he never reveals his own supernatural powers).

Washington looks a bit like Russia because, while Russia never actually established settlements, all the Pacific Northwest was claimed as Russian territory (until Russia signed a treaty relinquishing any claims south of 54-40 latitude north) and there is a sizable Russian-American population in Washington.

I'm not kidding about the child slave labor thing. I just find it so ironic that people rant about how they're saving the world by buying an electric car when the means of making it involve gross human rights violations. The quinoa thing is also true. Then again, considering this is the generation that grew up watching Captain Planet, I suppose it's to be expected that the environment is the be-all end-all of ethical issues in the world.

Sorry to any fans of the Twilight series out there. I used to be into the series, myself, but then got really put-off when I looked back through it and realized that it a) was little more than wish-fulfillment; b) promoted unhealthy relationships and unrealistic relationship ideals; c) was riddled with purple prose and generally childish writing; d) promised too much and didn't deliver; e) infested the world with hardcore fans who think that if you don't consider Twilight the best book ever written then you are clearly Hitler and should totes set yourself on fire for not loving Edward, bitch! — Also, I may or may not be bitter that reading Twilight in my sophomore year of high school exacerbated my developing chronic depression (my mother told me she was worried about the effects that reading the books seemed to have on me; but, like Bella, I considered parental concern for my wellbeing to be stupid and controlling).

Oregon Trail is this old, online game that teaches kids about the experiences of pioneers traveling to the Oregon Territory. Word of warning, it is incredibly frustrating because either you or your teammates (or all of you) frequently end up dying from dysentery.

"Skookum" is a Chinook Jargon word often used to refer to a mythical creature that lives near Mount St. Helens associated with what we call "Bigfoot." Washington is a major Bigfoot-sighting state.
Muddying the Waters

Chapter Notes

And now, what many of you have been waiting for, the beginning of our America x South arc.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

America shook hands with a number of nations as they filed out of the conference center on the last day. He had made agreements to work with a group of nations on scientific studies on non-nation personifications in the near future and was simply wishing his colleagues a safe departure until the next time they would meet. At the same time, it allowed him to think through what Nebraska had spoken to him about. As terrifying as the prospect seemed, America knew his son was right and the truth had to come out. It had been eating away at him for long enough and the only way he could truly get past it was to open up.

"Doing better, I see," came a smooth, female voice from behind him.

America turned and saw Mexico watching him intently.

"Yes, Rosa," he said. "I am doing great after being put under the eyes of the whole world, yet again."

"You have that contemplative expression on your face, Alfred. It's the same one you have when you are planning something big. I must warn you, though, that should what you are up to threaten my family in any way -"

"You'll rip out my heart and feed it to the jaguars. And, no, it's nothing dangerous. Rosa?"

"¿Sí?"

"Have you ever thought about... talking to someone about the past?"

"Why in hell would I ever want to talk about the past? The past should be left dead and buried like the bodies in a cemetery."

"So... only allowed to walk the earth for two nights a year?"

Mexico gave him a light cuff upside the head. Even by now, America couldn't figure out their relationship. Both of them had the intense emotional baggage from what went on between them and South, and Mexico was still furious over losing Texas and California, but she did not seem to actually hate America, himself. They had this awkward kind of half-friendship where they supported each other but ended up saying things which eventually made each other upset or angry. To say nothing of the times Mexico tried to do things to thumb her nose at America, often wrangling Canada into helping her until the pressure got to be too much for the quiet northern nation. It was an odd kind of emotional dance where they both tried to avoid doing something hurtful, because, at the end of the day, they still cared very much about each other.

"I am serious, though, Rosa," America continued. "I am going to talk to some of my friends about... about everything that happened."
"Everything?" Mexico said, looking a bit wary.

"Everything as I remember it. I just really need to get what happened off my chest. You understand that, don't you?"

Mexico gave a short sigh and nodded.

"Sí, I understand," she said. "I suppose it is too much to expect that what happened between you, me, and the bruja—ahem…and Louise would remain secret forever. I only hope you will not be too harsh when informing your friends of what transpired between us, Alfred."

"Hey, both of us made mistakes," said America. "Despite whatever crazy, messed-up history we have together, I do think you are a good person, Rosa. And, for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Mexico bit her lower lip and avoided looking him directly in the eyes. No matter how many times she told herself she was over him, he would do something to remind her of why she had wanted him in the first place. It simply wasn't fair.

"You know, maybe you should talk to someone, too," America added. "Get your side of the story across and all that."

"Really? And who would I talk to about this?"

"How about Spain?"

Mexico didn't even try to hold back the disgusted expression from her face. She may have forgiven Spain for centuries of violence, oppression, bloodshed, and cultural genocide, but she was a long, long way off from confiding in him about her feelings. Let alone telling him about her experiences with thwarted romance, violent rivalries, and raising her children all alone in a society that was not exactly accepting of unwed mothers.

"Okay, maybe not. But just think about it. I'll let you know how things go with me and my friends, all right? Have a good day, Rosa."

Mexico watched America leave with a certain degree of trepidation. Despite the turbulent history they shared, America sincerely held no hard feelings towards her. Mexico, however, had never been able to fully give him up. After all, it is never easy to forget one's first love. And she couldn't blame America for wanting to talk to someone about that woman and all she'd done to ruin everything. Forgetting one's first love may be difficult, but forgetting the hussy who stole him away is impossible. Mexico could only hope that America wasn't too forgiving when it came to South and that the other nations would see the woman for the evil bruja she was.

Before taking their leave of the United States, several countries found themselves recipients of letters. The stationary was old fashioned and bore ornate, gilded decorations. The letter, itself, was standard for all:

Dear Friend,

You have been invited to a gathering at the attached address on Tuesday, March 5th. There is a matter of importance which must be discussed and, if you have received an invitation, it means I believe you are deserving of my trust. This matter is very sensitive and I would appreciate your discretion.
Accommodations and refreshments will be provided, and someone will be waiting at the Elk Place at Canal bus stop from the airport terminal to bring you to the final destination.

P.S. I also advise that you wear a strand of colorful beads around your neck when you arrive, otherwise you might draw some weird looks.

Yours sincerely,

Alfred F. Jones

The nations stared down at their letters in surprise. Several of them were flattered by the invitation as they had not expected America to place such trust in them, though everyone was confused by the last point. They eyed the address provided with speculation and saw it was for a house in a city named "New Orleans."

England couldn't repress the slight shudder as his feet touched the streets of New Orleans after leaving the bus terminal from the airport. He always felt unwell when exposed to French things, and the very air of the place exuded Frenchness like an overpriced perfume or a plate of frogs' legs. Any moment, England expected France to pop into view and begin invading his personal space. In all honesty, England had almost forgotten that France had left a large mark on America's culture; though he certainly wouldn't forget the ball of rage that was Louisiana (England was certain he still had scrapes and bruises from that meeting).

"Bienvenue!"

England just about jumped out of his skin as he was met with the same lunatic state who had attempted to skewer him with a cutlass the last time they'd met. Louisiana was much the same, with her black hair, light brown skin, and crystal blue eyes, though her attire was a wild mash of green, purple, orange, and gold and she was wearing thick strands of multicolored plastic beads.

"Don't you worry none, cher," she said. "Papa ordered me not to skin you and nail your carcass to de door of St. Louis's Cathedral."

"Oh, how fortunate I am," England muttered dryly.

"You should consider yourself fortunate dat no one has tarred and feathered you, yet. Why are you not wearin' beads, as Papa instructed?"

"I thought that was some kind of joke."

Louisiana glared sharply at him before grudgingly removing one of her myriad ropes of glittering color and shoved it forcefully at England.

"We do not joke about such in my city," she said. "Now, come dis way, cher. The ot'ers are waitin'."

England was rather disgusted to see France was already there, grinning smugly and wearing several strands of pink and purple beads around his neck. Along with France were Germany and Prussia, the latter looking far more enthusiastic than the former, a cheery-faced Northern Italy and a scowling Southern Italy, a camera-wielding Japan, a mysterious guy who looked a lot like America but whose name escaped England, and, of all people, a happily smiling Russia who was looming over a nervous Lithuania. England was momentarily struck when he saw his sister the Republic of Ireland among them, sharing some beer with Prussia and covered in green and gold beads. Denmark was
also in the group, being his usual loutish self and talking about his axe. Lastly, there was Spain, who shot a subtle glare at England when he saw him approach.

"Ah, bon, we are all toget'er, now," said Louisiana. "Messieurs et mademoiselle, your carriage awaits."

When she said 'carriage' she literally meant an old fashioned, open-air, horse-drawn carriage. It had been specially modified so that it could hold the large number of guests – or, perhaps, it was an original carriage which America had had built so large because of the size of his family – and was drawn by a team of very beautiful horses, which, Louisiana explained, were on loan to her from her brother Kentucky.

"I will be your charmin' and gorgeous hostess for dis journey," Louisiana proclaimed as she got into the driver's seat. "Just 'cause Papa needs to speak with ya'll don't mean I can't take de chance to show off on de way."

"I am so proud," France said with a sniffle, wiping away a tear from his eye. "She knows the most important rule of being French. Never pass up the opportunity to show off how wonderful you are."

Beside him, an invisible figure let out a tired sigh and softly counted to ten in French.

"I can't help but feel as though I'm missing something," England thought aloud as he and the other nations settled into their seats. "As if there's a significant event today that I've forgotten."

"Do not concern yourself, cher," Louisiana said, her pleasantness towards England a little forced. "N'Orlins is a quiet, peaceful city wit'out too much hoopla to bog it down."

No sooner had she pulled the carriage out onto the street than the entire party was besieged by music, confetti, and the spectacle of people in elaborate costumes already swaying from immense amounts of alcohol despite it not yet being noon.

"We do have a li'l festival 'round dis time of year, dough," Louisiana added. "Call it 'Mardi Gras.'"

Louisiana, rather than take the guests straight to America's house, chose to show them around first by driving up Royal Street and pointing out routes to various sites. Her tour ranged from the interesting…

"Up dat street is de Museum of Death, and dat one leads to de Mardi Gras Museum. Up dere's where John James Audubon used to live. And dat's de former site of de Théâtre de l'Opéra where de very first opera was performed in North America in 1796."

….to the strange…

"What a charming parade," France said as he saw a crowd of people following a car that was transporting an elaborately-decorated box thAat was half-buried in flowers while a band played a roaring version of 'When the Saints Go Marching in' and scantily-clad girls tossed beads to the spectators.

"Uh, dat ain't a parade," said Louisiana. "Dat's a funeral percession."

The nations stared as the procession continued its raunchy, lively way towards a cemetery, passing the rows of ominous mausoleums and gnarled trees.
"Hey, life's one big party," Louisiana said to the nations' incredulous stares. "Why can't death be one, too?"

...To the downright disturbing.

"Ve~ that's a pretty house," Veneziano said, pointing to a large, old mansion as they reached the intersection of Royal Street and Governor Nicholls Street.

"Yeah, but I don't recommend goin' in dere," said Louisiana. "Dat's de LaLaurie House."

"What's wrong with it?" said Romano testily. "A mold problem?"

"Nah, it's just Madam LaLaurie's ghost will likely rip ya'll into tiny, bloody pieces if she gets her hands on you."

For a brief second, the nations thought they saw a dark figure at one of the upstairs windows. However, it darted away with a brush of the window curtain. The temperature in the surrounding area also dropped by a noticeable degree.

"Yeah, I know you're still in dere, you old hag!" Louisiana shouted at the house. "You can't outrun justice for what you did to dose in'cent people!"

"Who are you unawesomely yelling at?" said Prussia.

"Delphine LaLaurie. She was a socialite in de early nineteenth century whom my maman and I ran out of town when we found out about de disgustin' t'ings de woman and her husband did to torture dere slaves. Nightmarish t'ings dat still cause me to wake up screamin' from de memories of when what she did was discovered. Barbaric, inhuman t'ings dat would churn de stoutest of stomachs. She escaped punishment for it in dis life, but soon...I'll make sure she gets what's comin' to her."

The dark look that fell over Louisiana's face at that pronouncement caused several of the nations to cautiously edge back in their seats.

"I think I owe America-san an apology for not taking his fear of ghosts more seriously," said Japan quietly.

"Well, here we are," Louisiana announced as the carriage pulled up outside an old house in the French Quarter.

Calling it a 'house' was a bit of an understatement, however. It was a tall, imposing structure with elaborate metalwork forming railings and ornamentation on the four levels and a set of several flags flying proudly from the upper railings (including France's and Spain's, as well as the U.S. flag, the Bonnie Blue, and the flag of Louisiana with its emblematic pelican feeding its own blood to its starving young). On the front door was a placard with the words 'Union, Justice, Confidence' in bronze.

Louisiana ushered the nations out of the carriage and then disappeared with it around a nearby street corner. The nations exchanged uncertain looks before Russia, not minding the strange and awkward atmosphere, tapped loudly on the door of the house. The door swung open and the more easily-startled nations reared back as they were met, once again, with Louisiana's smiling face.

"Ah, bonjour, ya'll are right on time," she said, checking her wristwatch. "Come in, come in, I am
about to serve supper. I hope ya'll like crawdads."

"Ve~ Germany, what's a 'crawdad'?" Veneziano whispered to his stern friend.

The inside of the house was particularly opulent. The designer was clearly a woman – or a very effeminate man – and was decked in all the splendor associated with the days of the sugar barons and cotton kings. Indeed, it was as if the nations had stepped back into the nineteenth century with all its thick velvet curtains and beautiful but uncomfortable furniture.

"Ah, oui, I see ya'll have noticed Maman's taste in décor," said Louisiana. "I would go for somet'in' a bit more modern, but she just put so much love into plannin' it all it would seem a sin to waste it. Follow me, please."

Louisiana led them into a large library. It had heavy, dark wooden paneling, red curtains, and large sofas. The shelves along the walls were crammed with books on nature and biology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, history, archaeology, and a number of other academic subjects. Additionally, there were various odd knick-knacks and curios stuffed into whatever free spaces had been available (England gave an uncertain look towards a stuffed owl in a bell jar that glared silently back at him). America was seated behind a large, wooden desk; his feet were propped up on the desk while he read something, but he immediately righted himself once the other nations stepped in.

"Oh, hey, dudes, glad you all could make it," America said, though his smile looked a little strained.

"Papa," said Louisiana. "Do you mind if I hurry up and set de food out? Only, I promised my dear Verónica dat we would go to de parade toget'er and I need to get dressed up right proper."

"Sure thing, Ana. But I reserve the right to final veto on any costumes."

"Ugh, de one night a year where I don't feel silly t'ings like shame or inhibitions and can fully embrace my drunk and debauched side, and you're still determined to spoil my fun."

"I'm a dad, it's in my job description."

Louisiana pouted and left, not allowing herself to slip into muttering under her breath until she was well out of hearing range (after all, it wouldn't be ladylike to mutter when people can hear). America invited everyone to take a seat.

"All right, America," England said seriously. "What's this all about?"

"Oui, you have been most secretive," France added.

America took a deep breath and looked at the group of nations around him.

"I invited you all here because I think it's time for the truth," he said. "You were all invited because either I trust you enough with this information or else I feel you deserve to know the facts." He looked at England first. "England, whatever else has gone on between us, I still consider you to be like a brother and I wanted you to be here."

England blinked in surprise. Certainly, things had gotten better between them ever since they worked together during the World Wars, and England had stuck by America in more recent conflicts in the Middle East even when it caused tensions with other nations, but England had long thought that America would never deliberately choose to confide in him (the whole business with the states being revealed had made England's hopes for their old, fraternal bond to be renewed even more unlikely).

"Ireland," America continued, turning to the red-haired woman. "For a long time, you were the
closest thing I had to a mother or older sister. Being separated from my biological family and with England gone so often, you were always the first person I knew I could confide in."

The Emerald Isle gave a watery smile in response and dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. Whenever England had left America alone, Ireland took any chance she could to visit the boy – often dragging Scotland, Wales, and/or Northern Ireland with her. In fact, Ireland probably did more to raise America than England did. She remembered the times America was frightened by a bad storm or caught sick with fever and Ireland would sing to him and play on her old harp to calm him down. Years later, America tried to repay her past kindness when he let her hide at his place after a failed revolt against England in 1848 and to recover from that damned potato famine and then again in the 1860s when the Fenians became a little too active for England's liking. England had wanted to stamp out Ireland's rebelliousness and "bring her to heel" once and for all, so she jumped on a ship and came to America, where she'd stayed until she felt she could safely go home without England arresting her on sight.

"I know why you invited me and Dane," Prussia spoke up. "Because we three are awesome together and awesome friends don't keep secrets from each other."

"More or less," America said with a chuckle. "You guys have stuck by me through a lot. I'm proud to consider you both my friends and I know I can trust you."

"Of course you can trust us, Al," said Denmark. "The bond of the Awesome Trio is unbreakable."

And it was, even with all the mess of the twentieth century. America still felt he owed Prussia for teaching him how to fight like a real soldier; to America, Prussia's teachings on war made all the difference when it came to winning in the Revolution. America also still blamed himself for all the suffering Prussia went through as East Germany during the Cold War; he believed that if he'd just been a little faster and taken charge before Russia did that it would have changed everything. America's bond with Denmark wasn't nearly so complicated; the two nations just liked and trusted each other a great deal. They'd first met in 1792 when Denmark recognized America's independence and the two just couldn't help but get along well. Denmark even trusted America to protect Iceland and Greenland during WWII when he realized his non-aggression agreement with Germany wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

"Yeah, great," Romano said impatiently. "Why'd you invite me and my idiot brother, though?"

"As I said, I only invited people here whom I knew I could trust," said America. "Don't think I've forgotten how you helped me and my family in the past, Romano."

Romano had a bit of an unspoken history with America. After the Italian Unification, Romano and his family were in dire financial straits and, so, Romano did the only thing he could to help by looking for work wherever he could find it. America offered him a temporary job, just as he later would for Lithuania, though Romano refused outright to do anything involving housework (he knew from experience that he was not suited to that). That was probably why he never met America's states – or else simply didn't know he had – as he got a job working for a coal company in some little backwater place called 'West Virginia.' The only thing of any real note that happened during his time there was when he rescued a teenaged girl during a mine collapse. He'd been surprised, at the time, that there was a girl working at a coal mine, but figured everyone assumed she was a boy as they simply called her 'Jones.'

Romano had visited the United States again after WWI when his family had, once again, fallen into financial problems. Veneziano had gone to work for Germany while Romano went back to America where he had a much more dignified job working at a music school in Boston, where he helped inject a good deal of needed Classical music culture into American society. And, of course, there was
the incident during that time when he saved a teenaged boy – who, now he thought about it, looked a lot like America – from being crushed by a falling piano which was being hoisted by pulley into an upper-level room at the school (a scenario, Romano later noticed, which found its way into a number of American cartoons).

Hindsight, it seems, was twenty-twenty, after all.

In point of fact, Romano had been to America several times long before then. France had hired him to help explore North America in the seventeenth century. Romano had even been here, in New Orleans, when LaSalle and Enrico de Tonti founded the city, and had even gone along with de Tonti's brother Alphonse when he and Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac founded a settlement much further north, some place called 'Detroit.' Even before that, Spain and France had sent Romano out to map the Atlantic coast of North America. There were moments during those voyages when Romano had almost thought he'd seen someone watching him from the shore, but had brushed it off as his imagination. But he'd always wondered…

"I know who my friends are," said America firmly.

"Even me, Mr. America?" said Veneziano shyly. "Ve~ You consider me a friend?"

"Sure I do. Hey, we still need to finish that quest of ours."

"Oh, yeah! Ve~ We were going to find the 'Legendary Ability to Read the Atmosphere' together! I think Grandpa Rome had a copy of it in one of his old villas. Ve~ We should plan an expedition. I'll bring the pasta!"

Germany pressed a hand to his face and silently counted to ten.

"Why did you invite me, then?" said Germany. "We are hardly good friends, America."

"Well, maybe you don't think so, but I still consider you one," said America. "And even if we haven't been on good terms, lately, I still respect your opinions a lot, Germany."

Germany was honestly taken aback at that pronouncement. He'd long thought that America looked down on him for his past mistakes. America's constant declarations of being a 'hero' left Germany with the impression that the U.S. considered anyone who didn't agree with him to be evil or, at least, an enemy. His and America's arguments about energy or America's conflicts with the Middle East had caused a serious strain on their political ties, and America's most recent boss had not been doing anything to make things better. It wasn't that Germany hated America, he just felt the other nation was too impetuous and didn't consider other nations' opinions.

"And I have another reason," America added. "A lot of what I plan to discuss with you all is very personal, so I felt that having someone rational and objective around could help put things into perspective. Maybe…maybe help me see what happened in a less emotional light."

"I…well, I suppose I should take that as a compliment," said Germany.

"And me, America-san?" said Japan. "You trust me with this information, as well? Even after all that has happened?"

"Japan, you are the last person I think would betray me, right now," said America. "In fact, it's because of what happened between us that I think that I can rely on you. Both of us did things we're not proud of and both of us learned from them to become better people. Of course, you can't let Hawaii, Guam, or Philippines know I trusted you with personal info. They're still…a little upset, I guess is the best way to phrase it."
Japan nearly cringed and also mentally added Alaska to the do-not-tell list. Philippines still sent him hate mail and had even threatened him when he and America started becoming friends again (he still remembered the night he woke up in his bed and saw the furious young woman standing over him, holding a machine gun and issuing her warning which she peppered with some colorful swears in Tagalog). No, Japan knew when to keep his mouth shut. Not a soul would know America told him anything.

America then turned to France and Spain.

"You two, on the other hand, I feel like I'm taking a risk by letting you be here," he said.

"Amérique, mon ami," said France, looking mildly hurt. "How could you ever doubt me and my concern for your wellbeing?"

"Because we haven't been on the best of terms in recent years, even though we were once very strong allies. In fact, our friendship seems to go back and forth every few years. And I know Spain's disliked me for even longer. Heck, I think he's already made up his own conclusions about what happened between me and Mexico."

"Don't be ridiculous, amigo," Spain said, a twinge of nervousness in his pleasant face.

"So, the fact that the two of you have been some of the strongest critics of everything I've done in the last two decades shouldn't be any cause for concern on my part?"

"What is a bit of critiquing between friends?" said France. "Spain and I never mean anything by it. We're hardly the most outspoken against some of your actions. And we're certainly not callous enough to take advantage of an old friend's trust."

Romano looked like he actually might start laughing at that statement. France was probably the last person who should be making such claims, considering how many times Romano had seen France and Spain stab each other or their other allies in the back when it suited them.

"I suppose," America said, though it was clear he wasn't certain. It was actually beginning to worry the other nations how levelheaded and calculating the normally goofy nation was being lately. "Consider it a test of my faith in old friendships. In any case, I think the two of you deserved to be here as some of what I have to say concerns you both."

America did, honestly, like France and Spain. He owed a great deal to them for helping in the Revolution and he greatly admired their art, literature, and history. And he especially cared about France like a brother, at least to the same degree as England. But the constant shifting of alliances and the harsh criticisms of his policies and government left him particularly cautious around them. Spain most of all, considering America and Spain had gone to war with each other in the past and never really got along well since then as America had destroyed the remnants of Spain's empire.

"Mr. America," Lithuania finally spoke up, though quietly so only the people immediately nearby could hear. "Not that I'm not honored you've decided to bring me into your confidence, but I am curious about why a certain someone is also here." His eyes darted over to Russia, who was idly browsing a section of the bookshelves containing works on astronomy.

"You're wondering why I invited Russia here," America stated calmly, drawing the large Slavic country's attention.

"Oh, Da, I have been most curious about that, myself," said Russia. "Are we finally to be being friends again, Amerika?"
"Psh, in your dreams," America said, though there wasn't the normal note of anger or annoyance in his tone. "I invited you here, Russia, because, for a while, you were the only friend I had in the nineteenth century. The only person outside my family I thought I could trust."

"Da, I remember. You were much less annoying in those days. So filled with a will to conquer and subdue all that stood in your way. I respected that."

"It wasn't conquering. I was unifying the land under democratic-republican principles."

"Whatever helps you to sleep at night."

Before America could give a biting retort, Louisiana poked her head into the room to let them know that the food had been set out for them.

"And, if you don't mind, Papa, I need to get goin'," she said.

"Let me see your costume first," America said, a paternalistic frown on his face.

"Aw, c'mon, Papa, can't you just trust me?"

America didn't budge and Louisiana sighed and stepped into the room. She was wearing a green, purple, and gold glittery dress in a 1920s flapper style. She had decked herself in copious strands of shimmering beads in the same colors, had stuck tall plumes of feathers into her headband, and had daubed a large amount of glitter into her hair and on her skin. America took his time processing whether her outfit passed the unspoken 'decency test' that all caring fathers conduct when deciding whether or not their daughters' clothes are appropriate for public viewing, especially when it came to flashy parties where alcohol was involved.

"All right, I can't find anything too out of line," he finally said. "But make sure you keep a can of pepper spray and a switchblade in your purse."

"I swear to God, Papa, you are way too paranoid," said Louisiana, shaking her head tiredly. "Not'in' bad ever happens at Mardi Gras."

"What about that shooting in 2015? Or all the drunk driving incidents? Or last year when you got so wasted you decided to summon a bunch of zombies? – Man, I had a hell of time covering that up."

"Oh, Papa, please. Dose were just…misunderstandin's. Besides, Verónica will be wit' me and she's promised to keep me outta trouble."

"Fine, fine. You girls have fun."

"Merci, Papa.″ Louisiana smiled at him and then turned and hollered, "Verónica, c'mon, cher, it's time to go!"

"Ay, dios mio, you don't need to yell," a young, female voice answered as another teenage girl entered the room.

She looked, to put it simply, a great deal like a female version of Spain. Thick, messy, dark brown hair and bright green eyes, accompanied by a saucy smile and a general air of good humor. She was notably darker in complexion than Spain, though, and had a bit of a larger nose and a couple of dreadlocks in her long hair. She had multiple piercings in both her ears, and her earrings were all made of gold and brightly-colored gemstones. She was dressed more provocatively than Louisiana in a glittery green two-piece outfit that highlighted her curvy figure and showed off her midriff. She was also wearing beads, though they were smaller, glass beads woven into thick, multicolored
strands which she had wrapped once around her neck like a choker and then allowed the rest of the strands to fall loosely down her front.

"Does your mother know you're wearing that, Veracruz?" America asked, arching an eyebrow suspiciously.

"Mama doesn't ask and I don't tell," the Mexican state replied evenly. "And this is nothing, Señor America. You should've seen me at Carnaval last year."

"I t'ink dere's still a video of it on YouTube," said Louisiana. She then quickly checked her cellphone. "Oh, wow, over two million likes."

Veracruz then took note of America's guests.

"Who are the stiffs?" she said.

"Dey're some of Papa's friends and colleagues," said Louisiana. "Nations."

"Oh, sí. The pendejos that Mamá always complains about."

"Verónica! Dat is not nice!"

"But that's what my mamá says," Veracruz replied dismissively. "She told me the other nations are slow-moving idiots who overthink everything and talk themselves to death without ever solving any problems."

"Well, you ain't gotta say it, too."

"Puebla told me I need to be more honest for Lent."

"I don't t'ink dat's what she meant, cher."

"Meh. You say 'tomato' and I say 'tomate.'"

"But I also say 'tomate,' sometimes."

"Hm, fair point. Let's call the whole thing off."

"Good. We have a parade to get to. Bye, Papa," Louisiana added, smiling and waving to her father. "Have a nice evening, Papa's friends."

Louisiana and Veracruz locked arms and strolled out into the steadily darkening New Orleans streets.

"So..." America said, hoping to break the awkward tension which had built up in the room during that exchange. "Dinner's served, I guess."

The dining room was just as elaborate as the other parts of the house, if not the most extravagant. A long, sleek wooden table took up the center of the room with more than enough chairs lined up along the sides for all the guests. Fine porcelain and silverware were set out as if the gathering were a state dinner and not an informal gathering of old friends and colleagues. An enormous fireplace took up one wall; above the mantel was a portrait which was draped in a black gauzy fabric. A large, crystal chandelier dangled from the painted ceiling above.
America seemed on-edge in this house, and both he and the nations looked very out-of-place for the setting. An onlooker might mistake the scene for a group of tourists visiting a historic house left in the condition it would have been in its heyday. The other nations definitely felt something was off about the whole setup.

The food was delicious, of course, which served to ease some of the concerns. The 'crawdads' Louisiana had mentioned turned out to be a kind of shellfish that resembled miniature lobsters. Louisiana certainly enjoyed cooking as there were dozens of different dishes on the table, many of them particularly spicy (something which caused nations like England, who had rather bland palettes, some discomfort and confusion).

"All right, America," England said after several minutes of uncomfortable silence. "Enough beating about the bush. Let's get to the point. Why have brought us all here?"

America took a deep breath and looked down the table at his friends, allies, and associates.

"I think it's time I told you all the truth about South," he said. Everyone watched him closely. "I haven't really talked to anyone about this before. Well, I've shared most of it with Philippines after she started living with us and became part of the family. And Canada has been there for some of what happened."

"Who?" a few people whispered to each other.

"Who're you?" a small white bear said, looking up at the young man holding him.

"I'm Canada," was the soft answer from the mostly unnoticed figure at the table.

"But I've never told the whole story," America continued. "And this is more people than I ever thought I'd share it with. I guess the best place to start is the early eighteen-hundreds, right around the end of John Adams's presidency.

"I'd been through a lot of crazy events in the years leading up to it. Things were looking up for a while and then Mr. Adams made choices that caused everything to begin a downward turn. His distrust of foreigners, his hatred for France, and his inability to deal with criticism all stirred up a lot of trouble for my family and my people. Don't get me wrong. I cared about Mr. Adams, but he just wasn't cut out for diplomacy."

"Wait a tic," said England. "I think I know that fellow. Wasn't he the one who tried to get us to speak to each other again? Came all the way to the royal court to help us make peace?"

"Yeah, and, after his and Abigail's experiences there, he said the only decent person he met at your place was King George. Funny how things work out, huh? The one person in your country that Adams spent years hating and rallying people against was the only person who treated him with respect.

"Anyway, we barely escaped another war and a rebellion. There was growing dissent amongst my people and my children, so I knew I needed a more inspiring leader. That's when Mr. Jefferson came back. The 1800 election was brutal and vicious, the first time I ever saw severe political mudslinging and electioneering. I already had problems with the rivalries between my kids, but that year made everything so much worse because they all picked sides. Everyone was about ready to rip each other's throat out. I could barely recognize the men who had helped me get my independence as they all turned on each other, even those who had once been close friends, like Adams and Jefferson. When it finally ended, I cannot even begin to describe the relief I felt."
America paused, took a sip from his water glass, and looked down thoughtfully.

"Everything began to change, after that," he said. "When Mr. Jefferson entered office, his vision for the future was just so different from what had happened before. When most of my Founding Fathers thought that the elite of society should be in charge, Jefferson took measures to protect the voice of the ordinary people, the poor farmers and tradesmen and people who weren't even property owners. He just...he cared about ordinary folks, because he knew how important it was to push for equality. Even...even if his notion of equality didn't extend to everyone."

America's expression turned wistful.

"Whatever else you can say about Thomas Jefferson," America said, "He understood people well. I think, maybe, he knew there was something missing, even when I didn't. Of course, none of us knew there was another North American personification running around. It probably wouldn't have changed anything if we had, though I have always wondered...I suppose it's a moot point, now."

America stood up from his seat and walked over to the fireplace where the painting still stood draped in black.

"I wonder if things would have been different if I had left the West to herself," he said.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" said France. "America, I thought you said she was the South. The Confederate States of America."

America shook his head.

"That's what she became," America said. "When I met her, she was something else. I was the east and she was the west. As the years went on and the divide between north and south got worse, we simply...changed roles. I'm actually surprised she isn't more known. Two people in this room had her as a colony for a long time."

America turned and gave a pointed look at France and Spain, who simply appeared confused.

"This city, where we are right now, this was her heart for so long," America continued. "But, as I said, things changed."

America turned back to the painting. He frowned and slowly reached his hand up and pulled the black gauze from it. The nations turned and stared at the smirking woman staring back at them from the canvas.

"It's an old story. A boy and a girl who fall in love at first sight. In this case, a boy named 'Alfred Jones' and a girl named 'Louise Dubois'..."
Mexico and America have a really weird relationship. My mother, who I believe I mentioned used to work in foreign service, has done a lot of work with Mexico. She told me that a lot of Mexicans act like they hate the U.S. because they feel that the U.S. doesn't respect them; however, they also really like Americans that they personally know (it's like an "oh, you're not like the rest of them, I know you, you're okay" kind of thing) and are also terrified of something bad happening to the U.S. because Mexico suffers from the fallout when the U.S. has serious problems, especially in economics. Mexico also has this habit of endorsing policies that the U.S. doesn't like just to annoy us and they frequently try to get Canada involved in whatever they're doing (and Canada often joins in but pretty much always backs out at the last minute because, as much as the U.S. bothers them, the Canadians end up realizing that their views on certain issues align more closely with those of the U.S. and they decide it's just not worth it to ruin things with us).

Louisiana is considered one of the most haunted states in the U.S. And no wonder with all the tales of murder, magic, and monsters. I remember the first time I heard about Madam LaLaurie and it seriously freaked me out (you know a person is horrible when slave-owners run them out of town with pitchforks and torches for crimes against humanity).

From my research on Veracruz, I just came to the conclusion that she and Louisiana would be besties because both of them love to party, have very diverse backgrounds due to their ports, and are very culturally oriented around arts, music, and food.

When John Adams went to England as an ambassador (hoping to forge an alliance with Britain because he really didn't like France), all the rich and powerful people treated Adams and his wife like dirt except for King George III, who shared a polite conversation with Adams and commended his diplomatic efforts. How is that for irony?
There was a time when their family was happy. There was a time when the States had a mother. There was a time when Alfred was in love.

Human names used. Warning: Some violence and blood.

1779

The first thing Alfred noticed about her was her eyes. Like twin stars of pure silver that glinted through the murky haze that dulled his senses.

"Oh, zat's good, you are ay-wake," she said in an accent that was some strange mix of French and Spanish and maybe something else. Her soft hands moved to help him sit up.

Alfred groaned faintly as he felt the pain in his head flare. That's right. He'd gotten a nasty injury at the last battle. England certainly wasn't pulling his punches. Alfred could only wonder just how badly hurt the men had been. A spike of guilt ran through him that his people were suffering because of him, because he wasn't smart enough or fast enough to stop it.

"Is zere anyt'ing I can get you? Water, per'aps?"

"I-I, yes, p-please," Alfred mumbled faintly. He blinked a few times to help his eyes adjust to the light. As he turned to look at her properly, his breath caught in his throat.

She was, quite honestly, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. In addition to the sparkling eyes that had greeted him when he had regained consciousness, she had other qualities about her appearance that made Alfred blush like an infatuated schoolboy. Her hair was a midnight black and so silky and wavy he wanted nothing more than to run his hands through it to see how soft it was to the touch. Her skin was as smooth as doe skin, and was of a light brown shade. Her face had a delicate shape to it, accentuated by fine cheekbones and an aquiline nose. She was of a fairly light build, but Alfred sensed that she was a lot stronger than she appeared. Her clothing was simple but of a good quality, and around her neck she wore a little, gold pendant shaped like the Fleur-de-lis. She wasn't one of the frail, powder-wearing dames of the colonial elite, but she had an elegance to her and a subtle grace that told him she could outclass any wealthy socialite.

She offered him a ladle of water, which he accepted gratefully.

"If you don't mind," he said softly. "Might I ask your name?"

She smiled brightly.

"Louise Annette Dubois."

"Louise," he repeated. "I'm Alfred."

"Just 'Alfred'?” she quipped, a cheeky smile on her face.
"Jones. Alfred F. Jones."

"What does ze 'F' stand for?"

Alfred smiled widely back at her.

"Freedom."

She had a high, tinkling, melodic laugh that made Alfred feel as though his heart had skipped a beat.

They sat in a companionable silence for a while. Soon, however, Louise said she needed to leave, but there was one last thing she had to do.

"Somet'ing to remember moi until ze next time we meet," she said.

She pressed a gentle kiss to Alfred's lips that left his head spinning. Or perhaps that was the blood loss.

Whatever the case, Alfred's exhaustion caught back up with him and he found himself slipping back into unconsciousness. When he awoke, Louise was gone. No one in the camp had seen her, at all. It was as though she was a phantom, vanished without a trace. But her image lingered in Alfred's mind for years afterwards, no matter how much he tried to convince himself she was simply an illusion conjured up by delirium. Something about her had just been so familiar to him, and not knowing what had happened to her pained him in a way that he couldn't understand.

_Early 1803_

Alfred and Mr. Monroe were about to meet with France. Alfred was holding a leather bag filled with cash and Mr. Monroe was preparing his spiel for the land negotiation. Congress had granted them ten million dollars to buy New Orleans from France (hopefully Florida, too, if France's treaty with Spain had covered it). Before they'd left, Mr. Jefferson had given them some solemn words of advice, "Be careful with France. He's a pleasant enough person, but he is a ruthless negotiator when it comes to deals. Do not let him know how much we're willing to pay and, for the love of God, Alfred, do not mention the states, the Quasi-War, the XYZ Affair, the French Revolution, or anything about France's new sovereign."

Alfred still rolled his eyes at the memory. It was as if Mr. Jefferson thought he was some clueless kid.

"Amérique, mon ami!"

Without warning, France had bounded up the hallway and pulled Alfred into a crushing hug, kissing him on both cheeks, and causing the poor boy to become red-faced and flustered at the unexpectedly friendly greeting. Alfred was astonished that France was welcoming him as if they'd just had another successful day stomping England on the battlefield and hadn't been about to shoot each other in the face only a couple of years ago.

"And how have you been, mon ami?" France said, sling an arm around Alfred's shoulders and steering him towards the room where the business meeting was to take place. "I see freedom is doing you well. You are much healthier than when last we met."

"Yeah, I was kind of worn-out. Had to build an entire political structure from scratch and there isn't really a guidebook on how to do that."
France began to laugh loudly. Alfred hadn't really considered what he'd said to be very funny and he could see the smile didn't quite reach France's eyes. Alfred suspected France was not nearly as happy as he seemed, considering the brutality of what had happened when France had overthrown his own monarchy and had to not only rebuild but try to keep his head intact – both figuratively and literally.

The two nations, followed quickly by Mr. Monroe who'd realized he was being left behind, entered into the conference room of the palace. Alfred almost sighed in frustration at the fact that it was just as opulent as the last time. Clearly, the new people in charge were hoping to recreate the pomp and excess of the monarchy France had driven himself insane tearing down. Alfred could only hope that things were going better for the poorer classes than last time around – he didn't hold out much hope, though, as things seldom ended well for the common folk in such situations.

Alfred wasn't too sure what to make of France's new boss, either. Napoleon Bonaparte radiated a confidence and capability that Louis XVI certainly never possessed or could've hoped to have; then again, Bonaparte was cast from a different mold than the late French monarch. Bonaparte, while not a commoner, was not originally of the upper echelons of French aristocracy, he was a man who earned his power and reputation on his own merit rather than simply inheriting a title. Alfred could respect that, but he was also wary of the man's empire-building goals and especially of his voiced ambition to establish the French empire in the Americas. Still, Alfred and Mr. Monroe were there to stymie at least some of France's control on American soil.

After the formalities and pleasantries were dealt with and the rest of the delegates were present (Mr. Livingston, the U.S. ambassador, made his appearance and sat with Alfred and Mr. Monroe on the American side of the room). Bonaparte said something to France and the nation immediately launched into his proposal.

"It is always wonderful to make such interesting deals with our old friends across the ocean," France said. "Ah, I am simply desolate that we cannot interact more often. Then again, that is all the fault of that stuffy, old rosbif who cannot allow friends to share things with one another."

The French delegates all nodded solemnly and muttered curses against the British Empire. Alfred, despite what some people thought of him, was not totally clueless. He could see France was spinning a yarn to earn sympathy from Alfred and the other Americans to potentially bolster a possible trade alliance and maybe foment anti-British sentiments. Alfred knew France was planning to launch an attack against England, Napoleon had hardly made a secret of his aims to bring about the end of Great Britain, and it left Alfred with a deep sense of unease that this land purchase would be directly funding such an attack – no matter how much he currently resented England, he still felt a twinge of brotherly affection for him.

"…Of course, in these dark times for the French people, we are faced against a foe who persecutes us most unjustly and seeks to sever our bond of revolutionary brotherhood and dreams of freedom and independence…"

There it was. Playing on Alfred's heroic ideals. Damned if it wasn't having an effect, too. Alfred already felt terrible about not doing more to help France through his own revolution. Still, Alfred knew to stick with Monroe and Livingston; they were the ones to keep him grounded and focused.

"…And so, gentlemen, we, the people of France, would like to extend to you a most generous offer. We are so down on our luck, as of late, we are willing to part with our prized territory in North America. For the price of fifteen million U.S. dollars, we shall give to you the entirety of our belle Louisiane."

Alfred stared at his companions, whose mouths had fallen open in shock. They had been willing to pay ten million for just New Orleans. Paying an extra five million for the whole of the remaining
Louisiana Territory, land which would double the size of the U.S. with the stroke of a pen, was something far beyond their wildest ambitions.

"Your offer is most generous, Monsieur," said Monroe, gathering his wits. "We are, admittedly, very shocked. Our intended land purchase was considerably smaller than what you are proposing and, by your leave and with Emperor Napoleon's permission, we would like to take a bit of time to communicate with President Jefferson about these most welcome changes."

France relayed the message to his emperor, who nodded and dismissed them.

Once outside the room, Monroe let out a deep breath and Livingston began nervously fanning himself with his hat.

"This is serious, gentlemen," Monroe said. "We were only authorized to purchase New Orleans. But, this sheer amount of land the French are willing to sell us…it's simply an opportunity we cannot afford to disregard."

"What about Congress?" said Alfred. "You know Mr. Jefferson believes everything needs to be decided democratically. He'd never sign something like this without a consensus. It goes against his ideals."

"Jefferson will sign it," said Livingston. "If he doesn't, he'll be considered a coward and a tool of Congress. The people adore a leader who takes decisive action and he knows it."

"That's right, Alfred," Monroe added. "By rights, the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific belongs to you. This will simply ensure you regain some control over a large part of it."

"If you're sure," Alfred said uncertainly. "My memories of the west have faded in the last few hundred years. I can't even remember how many tribes live out there, now."

"Don't worry about it, lad," said Livingston. "This will all work out for the best."

Jefferson did sign the authorization to the delegates, approving the extra five million dollars to purchase all of Louisiana for the United States (he'd even ended up having to borrow some of the funds from a couple of European banks he was on good terms with). He later asked Congress to approve the decision, which they did almost unanimously – though pockets of resistance were soon stirred up by the Federalists in the House of Representatives. On July 4th, 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was officially announced to the public (though the delegates had actually signed the purchase in April) and the enormous stretch of land passed into the hands of the United States. Monroe cheekily whispered "Happy Birthday, America" to Alfred as he handed him the document.

December 20th, 1803

New Orleans was a beautiful place. So lively and bright, the air itself filled with the rich scent of spices brought in from all corners of the world and alive with a thrum of music and vibrant color. But Alfred wasn't just here to take in the sights. He was here to formally induct the new territory into the U.S. The official land purchase had been made months earlier, but there were still other arrangements which had to be made with the local government.

As he walked through the Vieux Carré, he caught sight of a well-dressed young lady flanked on either side by stern-looking Ursuline nuns. What drew Alfred's attention, though, was how familiar the young woman was. She must have sensed him watching, because she stopped and turned to look
at him with the same, striking, silver eyes that Alfred remembered from what seemed a lifetime ago. She smiled that same, big, pearly-toothed smile and quickly said something to the holy sisters, who nodded at what she told them, and hastily approached him. Alfred was frozen in shock as she came straight up to him, took his hands in hers, and leaned in to kiss him gently on the lips.

"It is good to see you ay-gain, Alfred," she said. "I 'ave waited for you."

"I…Louise?" Alfred stammered. "But, how are you…?"

There was that laugh of hers, again. A rich, musical sound that had Alfred thinking right back to the first time he heard it.

"Did you not suspect, zen?" she said. "You may be Amérique, but I am your Louisiane."

"Louisiane? Louisiana! You're the Louisiana Territory!"

"Oui. I am Louisiana. Your Louisiana."

"My…?"

"Your government just purchased me. For you. Zat is why you are 'ere, non? And, I am flattered by your offer of marriage. Zough I wish it 'ad been made more romantically."

Alfred just gaped at her. What did she mean 'marriage'? It was just a land acquisition, right? Wasn't it? Then again, Alfred knew very little of how unions like this affected personifications. He was still new to foreign relations, and, even then, he tried to stay out of the business of the rest of the world. Alfred had never suspected for even a moment that there might be some additional requirement to extending his border.

The shock must have shown on his face, because she started laughing once again.

"Oh, mon cher," she said. "I told you I 'ave been waiting for you. I 'ave waited for a very long time."

Something in her words resonated with him. There was just this odd quality about her that drew him in. There was a connection between them, there was no doubt about it. And, in all honesty, something about the thought of the two of them being together just felt…right. It was as if she was a lost piece of himself. Not fully a nation of her own, but somehow inexplicably linked to him.

In addition to that, he knew he needed someone with him in his life. He was a young man, a young nation, a single father to a swarm of squabbling states, and he still wasn't sure if he could handle the weight of his new responsibilities by himself. Louise just seemed so confident, so sure of herself, that Alfred found himself picturing a future with her at his side. Alfred had been founded and settled predominantly by Christians, so he was a strong believer in divine providence. And such providence had surely led him here to unite with someone he couldn't help but recognize as his missing other half. His partner, his helpmate, his first love, his wife.

Almost without thinking, Alfred dropped to one knee, now returning the hold that Louise's hands had on his.

"Louise Dubois," he said in a tone far more serious than his normal, boisterous self, "Louisiana, I know we have been brought together by the arrangement of our governments, but I would like to ask you: Will you do me the great honor of being my wife?"

"My darling America," she said. "Ze answer 'as always been 'yes.'"
A boy and a girl, laughing as they ran up the streets of New Orleans. To the older, more conservative people the display was indecent and undignified. But most barely spared a second glance, recognizing the unmistakable and irrepressible sight of two young persons in love.

Alfred and Louise finally came to a stop when they reached the Cabildo at the Plaza de Armas. The U.S. officials, William Claiborne and James Wilkinson, were surprised to see their nation arrive arm-in-arm with a young woman, particularly a woman who seemed to them to be obviously of a mixed-race Creole background. The French interim governor, Pierre-Clément de Laussat, seemed a bit puzzled, though that was likely because he had only been in his position for a few weeks and was not as informed as the more veteran officials appeared to be. One burly gentleman, Sebastián Calvo de la Puerta, known more commonly as "Casa Calvo," made a rather scathing comment in Spanish when he saw Alfred.

Louise glared at the man, but Casa Calvo remained unmoved.

"Alfred, where have you been?" said Claiborne. "We need to start the flag-raising ceremony."

"Sorry, Mr. Claiborne," said Alfred. "Louise and I got here as fast as we could."

"Who is…?" Claiborne started to say, but trailed off as understanding dawned in his eyes. "I see. Well, welcome to the United States, Mademoiselle."

Louise smiled at him.

"I wonder if I might borrow you for a moment, Alfred?" said Claiborne.

"Sure thing, sir," said Alfred and the two stepped aside.

"Alfred, I need you to understand how precarious our position is, right now," Claiborne said quietly. "That Spanish man there," he nodded subtly towards Casa Calvo. "He's one of Louisiana's former governors. He hates Americans and would do anything to undermine us. I've seen him and Wilkinson talking a great deal with each other."

"What are you saying, sir?"

"I think Wilkinson may be a spy for the Spanish government. And I'm concerned what he and Casa Calvo may do, given enough time."

"Mr. Claiborne, what's going on?"

"Alfred, this isn't just a land transfer. Haven't you noticed how many soldiers are present?"

Alfred glanced around and saw that, yes, a large division of U.S. troops had been brought out. Alfred had assumed the military presence was mostly just ceremonial, like an unspoken way of assuring the Louisianans that the United States was ready and able to protect them.

"What are you saying, sir?" said Alfred.

"Alfred, the locals are not particularly happy that they've been essentially sold by France along with the territory. This is a military occupation."

"But…Louise is…"

"She's doing what all women in her position would do. She's trying to win the confidence of her
"What? No. You're wrong. She and I...we fell in love as soon as we saw each other."

"Alfred, would you listen to me for one damn second? This is all a political ploy. Men and women simply do not fall in love the moment they see each other."

"No, you just don't understand how things work for people like me and Louise. If you'll excuse me, Mr. Claiborne, I need to return to my fiancée."

With that, Alfred turned away with an indignant huff.

Claiborne kept a cautious eye on Alfred and Louise as the French flag was lowered from the flagpole and the Stars and Stripes of the United States was raised. As the troops lifted their guns to fire a salute in honor of the new administration, Claiborne's gaze drifted over to Wilkinson and Casa Calvo before flicking over to the crowd of civilians watching the spectacle with stony faces. Claiborne was fiercely loyal to his nation, even if Alfred had decided to act hardheaded on the Louisiana issue, and he was not going to allow anyone to interfere with his nation's happiness. If Alfred decided that he couldn't be without this Louise girl, then, regardless of his own reservations, Claiborne was going to do everything he could to ensure no one stood in the way of that union. Not distrustful locals, not embittered Spanish colonial officials, and certainly not an unsavory, possibly-traitorous fool like Wilkinson.

Understandably, Alfred's return home with a fiancée caused a bit of an uproar.

Jefferson had been thrilled, for obvious reasons. He congratulated the couple, stating that it was high-time they had something to celebrate. Monroe was similarly pleased, going so far as to credit himself with arranging such a suitable match for America as he was responsible for handling the Louisiana Purchase, though Madison kept interjecting that the whole thing had been his own idea from the outset. Hamilton, too, had been happy for Alfred and had taken the young nation out for a drink, despite the fact that he wasn't overly-enthusiastic about his nation's new bride, if only because he disliked anything that made Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe happy.

Adams, however, had been particularly irked by the situation. Alfred had been subjected to a long-winded rant from the man about becoming "involved" with a woman like Louise and how her strange ways would corrupt him and how she wasn't good enough for him and so on and so forth (the term "Creole strumpet" was used by the former president, at one point, which resulted in a smack upside Adams's head delivered by his own loving wife Abigail). Alfred mostly tuned it all out and thought about what some of his other Founding Fathers would have said if they were still alive.

Old Ben Franklin would have likely thrown a party and made a bunch of suggestive jokes. Samuel Adams (who had died only a couple months before Alfred had traveled to New Orleans) would probably have said something like "as long as she doesn't drink tea, I am certain you two will be well-suited to each other." And Washington...Alfred teared up a little at the memory of his greatest father-figure...he'd like to think that Washington would just want him to be happy, and would, at the very least, be pleased that Alfred would have a good woman at his side to help him raise his children and stay focused on his responsibilities.

In the weeks leading up to the wedding, Alfred faced similarly divided responses from his other government officials. Some were ecstatic and kept coming up to offer their felicitations, while others, like Adams, acted like a pack of overprotective fathers trying to keep their precious and pure son...
away from a woman they saw as a gold-digging hussy. If the entire business hadn't been giving Alfred a headache, he would have felt touched by the concern of the latter group (even if they were clearly wrong).

His children hadn't made the whole thing any easier. While most of the kids were overjoyed that they would now have a mother, several of them protested rather vehemently to allowing a strange woman to just walk right into their family. New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Delaware were the nay-sayers, and were rather determined to keep their distance from Louise.

Alfred hoped they would warm up to her, given enough time.

They had decided not to hold the ceremony in a church, just to prevent an argument about religious favoritism. After all, Louise was Catholic and Alfred was...something. Frankly, America had so many different faiths in him that he wasn't sure what faith he was. He preferred to think of himself as unaffiliated and he liked to believe he saw a measure of truth in most every religion, though the fact that Judeo-Christian principles and beliefs dominated much of his cultural landscape did shape some of his perspective and inclined him to be somewhat more favorable to those faiths, though he did still respect those who did not share such sympathies.

While they were not marrying in a church, Alfred and Louise did still feel a religious sanctification was necessary, as Christian belief still played a major role in American life. So a military chaplain was brought in to bless the union. The chaplain was agreeable enough about the business, even going so far as to assure the young couple that marriage was a sacrament performed between a couple and God, and that where they chose to make such a covenant had no actual bearing on its holiness.

The wedding was also proving to be quite a spectacle. In fact, it was unusually lavish for the time, as most weddings in that day and age were little more than a slightly protracted church service, possibly followed by a party or something to commemorate the occasion. But Alfred was not the type of man to go for subtlety and was determined to set a precedent for what a wedding should be.

The assembly hall where the wedding was to take place had been decked in flowers, bunting, ribbons, paper chains, and other flashy ornamentations. Ordinarily, wedding celebrations would take place at the home of the bride's parents, but such a thing was, understandably, not possible. Alfred had offered to invite France (as he assumed Louise would want her 'father nation' there), but Louise said not to bother and not to invite Spain, either. There was a strange sort of cold glint in her eyes whenever France or Spain was mentioned, but Alfred decided not to pry.

Pennsylvania and Georgia had taken great delight in planning the decorations and were quite proud of their work. New York had made arrangements for musicians to perform both a piece for the bride to march down the aisle to and the music for the dancing that would follow the ceremony. The Carolinas worked tirelessly to make wedding clothes. Virginia ensured everyone was organized and contributed something to the effort, occasionally shouting at any "layabouts" and continuously reminding everyone that a wedding was a celebration of love and that anyone who jeopardized this wedding clearly hated love.

March 9th, 1804
Alfred was nervous and kept fidgeting with his cravat.

Virginia snapped at him to stand up straight and act dignified. He was getting married, for goodness' sake. When Alfred grumbled about the fact that he was being bossed about by his own daughter, Virginia pouted and pretended to get upset about her father not appreciating all the work she'd done to make his wedding day special. Alfred desperately insisted that it was "just nerves" and that there was no need for his "little princess" to cry. Massachusetts and Connecticut glared and made disgusted noises behind him.

Virginia ignored her brothers as she was too busy checking to make sure her father's jacket was buttoned properly. It was a new jacket, hand-made by the Carolinas and dyed with indigo the girls had grown, themselves.

"Is it time, yet?" Rhode Island muttered impatiently. "I'm getting bored."

Virginia shot him a look but then went and peeked into the hall.

"Yes," she said. "The chaplain and registrar are in place. You men can go in, now."

The boys all straightened themselves out into a neat line. Massachusetts picked up little Ohio as he got into place. Alfred then led the little gaggle of boys in through the side door to stand with the officiators of the ceremony. He glanced out into the assembly and was pleased to see many encouraging looks from the guests. Adams was still looking as crusty and irascible as usual, but Abigail gave him a slight jab to the side and he managed to force a small, strained smile. Jefferson and Madison were both drying tears in their eyes.

Off to one side, Alfred saw his sisters, Oneida and Tuscarora, and a few of their other siblings who had decided to start trying to reconnect with him – despite the protests of some of his Founding Fathers at allowing Indians to be present, Alfred had insisted that a place be made for them. He may look like the people of European descent, but Alfred's heart still called to his birth family and his native people. He just wished the other guests would stop looking so uneasy about their presence.

Alfred took a couple steadying breaths and counted in his head, trying to calm himself down. However, he immediately tensed back up when the music started and he glanced up the aisle. His daughters, all dressed in their Sunday finest, were marching along, scattering flower petals about them (though Delaware and New Hampshire were doing so with great reluctance). At one point, little Tennessee tripped over her fairly long, frilly skirt and took a small tumble; she blushed a bit, but got right back on her feet and acted as though nothing had happened.

Then, the music seemed to fade as Alfred caught sight of Louise. Her dress was of silver fabric, made of light material that seemed to float around her as she moved. Her black hair had been elegantly styled into ringlets and ornamented with pearl hairpins and small flowers. In her arms, she carried a large bouquet of red roses. To Alfred, she seemed an ethereal being of both mortal and divine natures, half glittering queen and half woodland nymph.

Alfred's mouth had gone very dry and his heart was thudding wildly in his chest as Louise stepped into place beside him and gave him a sweet, adoring smile.

"Dearly beloved," said the chaplain. "We are gathered together here in the sight of God, and of these honorable men and ladies, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men. And, therefore, is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand,
unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained."

Alfred shared a long and meaningful look with Louise. He wasn't marrying her out of base desire or simply to secure the unification of east and west; even though he'd known her only a short while, he truly believed that she was his soulmate. While their marriage was somewhat hasty and they barely knew each other, he was certain it was the right thing for both them and the children.

"First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name."

Alfred glanced over his shoulder at the crowd of states standing behind them. Most were smiling and excited and eager. All except the four dissenters who stood there looking as though they were planning to secede from the country just to be spiteful.

"Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body."

Alfred actually blushed a bit at that. In truth, he thought very little about sexual relations, as he found the subject somewhat embarrassing. It was why he was so nervous for his and Louise's first night together. While some might have blamed the Puritans for that, the truth was that they had actually drummed it into his head that, should he marry, he was under stern obligation to fulfill...husbandly duties as often as possible with the consent of his lady wife. His Puritan fathers had been quite clear on that point and had warned him to only ever marry for love so that he would be less tempted to stray. Not that the thought of being faithless even seemed remotely possible to him in this moment.

"Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore, if any man can shew any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."

Alfred could practically sense Adams and a few others hoping to stand up and voice their opposition to the union. Nothing came of it, however, and the ceremony proceeded to the swearing of the vows. The chaplain turned first to Alfred.

"Alfred Freedom Jones, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," Alfred said with all seriousness and resolution.

The chaplain then turned to Louise.

"Louise Annette Dubois, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," Louise answered. Alfred noticed that there were a few tears in her silver eyes, but her smile was unwavering.
The two took each other by the hand and pledged themselves. The registrar presented them with the marriage certificate, which they both signed, and then the rings were produced. Louise took the plain gold band and placed it upon the ring finger of Alfred's left hand. Alfred took a smaller, more elegant gold band set with a dark sapphire and placed it on the ring finger of Louise's left hand.

"With this ring," Alfred recited the vow, "I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

The chaplain then gave a prayer and blessing before saying: "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

That evening...

Alfred stood on the large, paved patio overlooking the gardens at the estate he'd built for Virginia. The homes he'd started for all his children had truly taken shape in the last few years and Virginia's was one of the most beautiful. He'd sent the children off to bed by that point, and was simply standing there as the cool of the evening descended.

He started, briefly, when he felt a slender hand entwine with his and his face began to heat up when he saw Louise there beside him, gently leaning against him. She had changed out of the elaborate wedding dress into a loose, frilled, white dressing gown. It had actually surprised America how little Louise had brought with her when they left New Orleans – a pair of day dresses, a Sunday dress, her dressing gown, and a few pieces of jewelry, as well as a small fortune she had saved up over the years from the allowance her governors had granted her.

"Louise?" said Alfred softly.

"Oui, ma moitié?" Louise replied.

"Are you…did you really want to marry me?"

"A bit late to be asking zat question, mon amour."

"I know, but…seeing how upset your people were with the changes…weren't you happy being by yourself?"

Louise pulled back a little and donned a contemplative expression.

"Was I 'appy?" she said, her tone somber. "Was I 'appy being alone, treated as an outcast by my own people, ignored by my government, passed from owner to owner, France to Spain to France ay-gain, wit'out ever being acknowledged by zem? Was I 'appy watching my government deliberately turn people 'gainst each ot'er, just to keep zeir control over zem? Was I 'appy being shut away in a convent for nearly two 'undred years, waiting and praying for my salvation? Tell me, mon Coeur, does zat sound like a 'appy life?"

Alfred felt a sharp sting in his chest and tears prickle in his eyes as he found himself wrapping his new bride into a comforting embrace. She clung to him in return, her own tears already falling freely.

"I love my people," Louise continued, "But zey did not love me. Zey despised me. You wondered why I did not want France or Spain at our wedding…it is because zey never knew me. Zey never cared enough to look for me. I was…I was a mistake. An aberration."
"You are not a mistake," Alfred said firmly. "You exist for a reason. In all my life I never saw another colony here besides Mexico and my brother Canada. Or Vermont, when he was a small republic. You needed to exist, Louisiane, and, I swear to God, I will do everything I can to protect your place in this world."

Louise drew back, her silver eyes glistening, and threw herself at Alfred, pulling him in for a deep, passionate kiss that left his head reeling. Around them, fireflies began to dance and the gentle southern breeze blew the fragrance of springtime flowers up from the gardens.

"You know," Alfred said once they separated. "I think I forgot something important."

"What is it, ma moitié?" said Louise.

"The bridegroom is supposed to carry his lady over the threshold, isn't he?"

"Oui, I believe zat is correct."

Without another word, Alfred lifted her up into his arms, drawing delighted giggles from Louise, and carried her back inside the house and up the stairs. It wouldn't be until sometime later that the last candle, lighting the master bedroom, was finally blown out.

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Early May, 1804

"Remember, while we're gone, I don't want any crazy hijinks," Alfred told his children seriously. "Del, Penn, and Ginny are in charge."

"Aw, what?" New Jersey moaned. "Why them?"

"Because we're the most responsible," said Virginia with a haughty look.

"And be sure to do what Monsieur Jefferson says," said Louise.

"With any luck, we'll be back in a few months," said Alfred. Possibly more, he added silently. Alfred adored his children, he'd sacrifice his own life to protect them, but he was still a nation who needed freedom to roam and explore; besides, a year or two was barely a blink in the lives of personifications, so such a trip would hardly be that long to them. More to the point, though, something was calling him away – as if it was vital that Alfred and Louise go on this journey.

Little Ohio clung to his father's legs and started crying. Alfred picked him up in his arms and gently rubbed his back.

"Hey, son, it's all right," he said. "I promise you, we're going to come back."

"I don' wan' you t'weave, Daddy" the toddler sobbed, his words punctuated by hiccups.

"Your new mother and I, we just need a little time to ourselves, son. We're going to explore the land and, maybe, when we get back, you'll get to be a big brother."

"Weally?"

"Really, really."

Ohio seemed a little mollified and allowed Alfred to hand him off to Pennsylvania.
"Alfred, *ma moitié,*" said Louise. "Our guides are waiting for us."

"All right, kids, I'm trusting you to look after yourselves for a while. I know you can handle it."

"Oh, Father, before you go," said Virginia. "President Jefferson asked me to tell you to keep an eye out for giant sloths. He found remains of one and wants to know if they run wild in the west, even if they have died out here in the east."

"If old Jefferson thinks that giant sloths are still out there, I will definitely keep watch for them."

The children all waved goodbye to their father and stepmother as the two of them left on their 'honeymoon' journey out to the west. It made the states very nervous that their father and stepmother were leaving; not that they doubted the abilities of their guides, Messrs. Lewis and Clark, but this was the first time since Alfred went on that fishing trip in Sandy Hook (an event organized by President Washington when he was attempting to force Jefferson and Hamilton to make nice by having them all go fishing together) that the states were going to be unsupervised, save for their local politicians and President Jefferson.

What could possibly go wrong?

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*A few weeks later…*

Massachusetts and North Carolina screamed like a pair of lunatics as they charged at the attacking pirates.

Flames roared around them and smoke billowed in clouds so thick it blocked out the stars. The smells of death and gunpowder and men pissing themselves filled the air. Still, the states fought with ruthlessness. Not all of the states were present in this war; it was Massachusetts, North Carolina, New York, and Rhode Island. Maryland was involved in the naval planning, but she was kept at a safe location away from the fighting – as far as the others knew.

The states might only have been children in form, no older than seven or eight in the case of the Thirteen and Vermont, but they were driven by the need to show their father that they could look after things while he was gone. Both at home and abroad.

These Barbary pirates had caused enough suffering and needed to be brought to heel. Attacking innocent merchant vessels and abducting the people on board to sell as slaves, to say nothing of the raids on European coastal towns to take people from nations as far away as Sweden – the solemn northern nation was, himself, participating in the conflict on his own flagship some distance away. Massachusetts was disgusted by it. While slavery was still practiced in his father's land (though, thankfully, outlawed in his own corner a few years before Massachusetts was born), the state knew that, when push came to shove, he would fight that vile trade wherever he could. Rhode Island shared his sentiment and felt not a hint of remorse as he scurried about the enemy ship's rigging to cut the ropes – even causing a large section of the rigging to collapse and crush a group of unfortunate pirates below.

New York and North Carolina were less altruistic. To them, the outrage was not so much about what the pirates did or the immorality of the slave trade as it was about the negative effects on their trade ambitions. The pirates had operated under the protection of the Regency of Algiers, the Eyalet of Tripolitania, and the Beylik of Tunis, who all had at least nominal support from the Ottoman Empire. The foreign nations had demanded exorbitant amounts of protection money from the United States to
shield American merchants from attack, but it was never enough.

While their father was gone, the states finally decided to get involved in the action which they had been largely excluded from until that point. Not that Delaware, Pennsylvania, or Virginia knew that they had all gone in person to fight. But there was no need to tell them that, was there?

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July 11, 1804

Alfred was attempting to climb an enormous tree, just to prove to Louise that he could, when it started. A sharp pain in his ribs that compelled him to instinctively clutch at his side, causing him to lose his grip and tumble to the ground.

Louise screamed and rushed to his side. The rest of the travel party was thrown into momentary confusion before someone shouted for the medical supplies to be brought.

"Alfred, ma moitié, what is wrong?" Louise said.

"S-something bad just happened," Alfred managed to choke out. "It felt l-like…like a bullet wound. In my ribs." He gave a pained grunt and pulled his hand away. Sure enough, there was blood seeping through his white shirt.

"Mon dieu! What caused zis?!"

"Stand back, Madam," said Commander Meriwether Lewis. He handed Alfred a flask of whiskey and began to examine the injury. "This does look like a bullet wound, lad. But…I don't understand. There were no gunshots."

"There was," Alfred said after a strong sip of the whiskey. "Somewhere. Someone very important was just shot."

"Non, you don't t'ink it was Monsieur Jefferson, do you?" said Louise.

"No…no, I don't think so. But it was one of my Fathers. He's hurt very badly. I don't…I don't think he's going to make it."

"Clark!" Lewis yelled over his shoulder. "Tell the men to stand back!"

A number of concerned members of the Corps of Discovery had attempted to approach. Lewis and Clark were the only ones with clearance from Jefferson to know who and what Alfred and Louise truly were. The other men might have had their suspicions, as the bond between nation and people was deep and inherent, but the two commanders of the expedition had been told to keep such knowledge as secret as possible. The nature of the secret of personifications was old and complex, as many times nations simply had to be involved in or present at key events regardless of their secrecy, but it was imperative that it not be made widespread knowledge. The longer nations stayed in contact with humans, the more those humans would remember them and understand what they were – it was why so many of Alfred's government officials knew who he was, as he spent so much time around both the older men like Adams and Jefferson and the young up-and-comers like Claiborne.

"Alfred…lad, stay with me," Lewis said, doing what he could to dress the wound.

"Honestly, sir," said Alfred. "I've had much, much worse." He suddenly clutched at the wound and fought back another cry of pain.
"Sometime later…"

"He hasn't left the boys' quarters all day," Maryland said worriedly as she and the others sat on the deck of their ship.

"Can you blame him?" said North Carolina. "He's just lost one of his dearest citizens. And, I say, we should all be grievin'."

"I thought you hated us Federalists, Kitty," said Massachusetts.

"Any man so loved by General Washington is deservin' of respect. I might not have agreed with Mr. Hamilton, but he was a good man."

"We can’t let this distract us," said Rhode Island. "We have work to do, here. These sons of whores think they can push around the United States and treat our people like vermin!"

The states present frowned and paused in silent thought for a moment. They’d read the old reports of what had happened when Jefferson and Adams had tried to negotiate with these people. Back in 1786, the two men had gone to London and spoken with Ambassador Sidi Haji Abdrahaman of Tripoli to try and end the kidnapping, pillaging, and enslavement, cautioning retaliation if it did not cease, but the man had sneered at them and told them, to their faces, that the Koran clearly said that any nation who refused to accept the word of the Prophet was a land of sinners whom the faithful had every right to enslave and exploit, and that those Muslims who died in that holy warfare would surely be honored in paradise.

President Jefferson had the states read the Koran as part of their education, once they were old enough to understand. People back home criticized him for it, citing such learning as anti-Christian and un-American, but he insisted it was essential to understand their foes and to learn how their beliefs shaped their views regarding the battlefield. He warned the states that there was a chance that they may be embroiled in such conflicts in the future and it was best to always be prepared.

"I think it's time we considered going home," said Maryland. "Not our forces. Just us. After that battle at Derna, we've practically won this whole thing. Preble and Decatur are already planning a full-on siege of Tripoli. The Bashaw won't be able to hold out against us once we take it."

"We cannot just abandon the fight," said Massachusetts. "Those men trust us. The least we can do is stand beside them."

North Carolina looked across the deck to where the brave U.S. Marines stood by, waiting and ready for their next orders. Whatever came next, there would be those among them who would never return home. It was a sobering thought, especially for someone who was still physically a child, that these noble, patriotic humans could so easily die and she had been too caught up in the thrill of fighting her enemy to notice until now.


Rhode Island looked down at the small knife he had in his hand. How many human lives had he laid low with his actions? The part of him that was a state warred internally against the part of him that was a little boy. He felt faintly sick to his stomach and his childish instincts made him want to cry.

"Preble and Decatur can take things from here," he said. "And the Swedes and Sicilians do not seem
as though they intend to back out of the fight anytime soon, either. I...I want to go home, too."

"Then we go home," said a solemn voice. The other states looked up and saw New York standing there. He clearly hadn't slept since they had received the news about Alexander Hamilton. "I can't...I can't be away from my land and people, anymore."

Massachusetts glared at New York, but kept silent. Much as he hated to admit it, he, too, felt the pull to return home. His pride and his patriotism furiously demanded that he keep on fighting, that it was the honorable thing to do to stand by to the very end of the conflict, but he was also as much a child as the rest of them. How any of them had even been allowed to leave the safety of home and enter a war zone was a testament to the strange times they lived in. Children often worked in jobs more suited for adults; even five-years-olds could enter certain fields of work. Human life was cheap, which was probably why the movement to abolish slavery still was not as supported as it should have been, but Massachusetts silently vowed to ensure things were put to rights...and he had an ominous feeling that the future held a fight far more intense than anything they had seen on the Barbary Coast that year.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!!"

Virginia was so red-faced as she scowled at her bedraggled, grime-smeared siblings that they swore a person could fry an egg from the rage-fueled heat she exuded.

"We have all been worried sick about you," she said. "I suppose you think it's funny, disappearing like that. Just you wait until I tell Father and Mother when they return home."

"She's not our mother," Massachusetts snapped.

"She's married to Father. Therefore, by rights, she is our mother. Now, answer my question. Where have the five of you been?"

"None of your God-damned business," New York growled, shoving past Virginia and heading inside to wash up.

"How dare you?! I am in charge while Father and Mother are gone!"

"Put a cork in it, Ginny," Rhode Island said tiredly, following New York inside. Followed shortly after by Massachusetts.

"And what do the two of you have to say for yourselves?" Virginia said sharply, rounding on North Carolina and Maryland.

"...We fought bad guys?" Maryland said halfheartedly.

"...And stomped 'em good?" North Carolina added with an unapologetic shrug.

Virginia pinched the bridge of her nose and took some steadying breaths.

Dinner at the White House that night was very tense. President Jefferson had been terrified when he realized that five states had disappeared under his watch, especially this close to election time, but
he'd been too busy with matters of government to follow up on the investigation, himself.

Still, seeing all the states there, unharmed and tidied up and sitting down to supper with him, was an enormous relief to the aging author of the Declaration of Independence. He did adore those children, even the Northern states who enjoyed making trouble for him. He'd seen all but two of his own legitimate children die and it brought him some measure of comfort to be surrounded by the rambunctious Jones brood.

"I hope the food is to your liking, children," he said pleasantly. He tried to keep things as informal as possible at the White House, perhaps even *too* casual – more than once he'd been caught in his bathrobe by a foreign dignitary.

"What on earth is this?" said New York, prodding with his fork at the strange dish in front of him containing small noodles and melted cheese.

"It's something I discovered on my travels in Europe," Jefferson said, beaming proudly. "I've become incredibly partial to it, recently."

Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina had already tucked in to the strange new food with gusto while a few of the pickier states poked at their servings with obvious reluctance. New York made a face, earning him a sharp glare from Virginia which he promptly ignored. There was a very uncomfortable tension in the room, even with Mr. Jefferson sharing interesting stories and scientific theories; treating the situation as practically a family gathering, considering how close he was with the states. The unspoken problem in the room, however, was regarding the upcoming presidential elections. There was a strange unanimity amongst the states that Mr. Jefferson should be reelected to office, with only two voices of dissension – Connecticut and Delaware (not even South Carolina opposed Jefferson's reelection, even though his opponent, Charles Pinckney, was a South Carolinian).

Finally, Connecticut couldn't take it anymore and, after tossing his napkin onto the table, stormed towards the door.

"If you all will excuse me," the boy said testily. "I have lost my appetite. Mr. Jefferson, sir, I beg leave for this evening, as I have one or two personal matters to attend to."

"Mr. Jefferson, no, do not let him leave," Virginia protested. "He has been meeting with members of the Federalist party, sir! He's a rotten, little schemer!"

Massachusetts and Rhode Island, two other Federalist hold-outs, made outraged noises at the slight against their dominant political party, despite their being supportive of Jefferson in this particular election now that Mr. Adams had left the political scene.

"Please, everyone, do let's calm down," Jefferson said evenly. "Connecticut, might I inquire as to what business you intend to pursue at this time of day?"

"I am writing letters to some associates, *sir,*" Connecticut responded with a hint of impudence in his tone.

"Very well. Do as you see fit. But do get to bed at a reasonable hour. I promised your father you would be looked after and I do not want you all overexerting yourselves."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

As Connecticut continued to walk toward the door, he was suddenly sent hurtling downwards. As Delaware helped him to his feet, he rounded on the sibling seated immediately by where he had
tripped, though North Carolina gave no acknowledgement of his suspicious glaring.

October 24th, 1804

Alfred was looking over the maps with Lewis and Clark, trying to figure out where the heck they were. Considering most of the maps had large blank spaces as most of the territory was uncharted, it made things infinitely more difficult.

"I 'ave a suggestion," Louise spoke up at long last. "Why do we not simply ask for directions?"

"Hmph, trust a woman to come up with a suggestion like that," Clark said dismissively.

"I think she makes a good point, William," said Lewis. "We did see evidence of local tribes around here. We might be able to request their assistance and purchase some fresh supplies."

"How do we know that they won't simply kill us and take our possessions – and our scalps, as well?"

"We could ask zose fur-trappers over zere," Louise said, pointing to a small group of grizzled men clad in animal skins who had somehow managed to sneak up on the expedition party unnoticed. "Bonjour!" she added, waving politely at the men.

The fur-trappers, despite their intimidating appearances, were clearly smiling behind their thick beards and returned the greeting in their strange dialect of French. After a brief introduction, the men revealed that they were on their way to a nearby Mandan-Hidatsa settlement to conduct some trade – indicating very strongly that the Corps of Discovery would be in no danger among those tribes, as they generally reserved their fighting energy for their conflicts with the Siouan tribes. Tired, hungry, and eager to begin establishing a base camp for the approaching winter, the Corps followed the strange men to the settlement.

The group was soon on the receiving end of numerous stares. Some of the natives were concerned about the size of the party, being comprised so heavily of strong, armed men, but their fears quickly abated as they saw Louise among their number, as war parties never traveled with women.

Alfred felt a strange stirring of familiarity as he walked through the village, as if he were coming home in a way. His attention was soon drawn when he heard a pair of loud, male voices arguing in two different languages…languages he'd thought he'd forgotten, long ago.

"Hiraacá, Numakaki," he said, almost a whisper. He turned and shared a look with Louise, who nodded as understanding dawned in her eyes. Alfred dropped his packs and gear and raced in the direction of the voices. "Hiraacá! Numakaki!" he called out. "Brothers!"

Two tall, dusky-skinned men turned at the call of their names being called in their own language. They were taken by surprise when a strange white man suddenly embraced them and called them his "brothers."

"Hidatsa," Alfred said, pulling back and grasping the arm of one of the two men. "Hiraacá." He turned to the other, taking him by the arm and saying, "Mandan. Numakaki."

"Do we know you, stranger?" said Mandan warily in his own tongue.

"I guess I have changed a great deal," Alfred said, slipping into nation-speak.
"You speak the language of all tribes," said Hidatsa in amazement. "You should not be able to do so unless you are…"

Hidatsa examined the stranger. While the white skin, fair hair, and blue eyes would deceive an onlooker into believing no connection of blood bound the two native men to him, there was something there in the shape of his face and the way that he held himself that was so familiar. Surely it was impossible, though. He had seen his youngest brothers run wild and free through these woods hundreds of years ago, but they had disappeared and never been seen since.

"Little Star?" Hidatsa said at last.

"What?" said Mandan. "It cannot be Little Star. He and Silent Warrior are gone."

"Not gone, exactly," Alfred said, rubbing the back of his head bashfully. "Just kept on the eastern coast for a really long time."

"That far away?" Hidatsa said with concern. "Are you hurt, little brother? Were you held captive?"

"No, I'm fine. I was raised by Europeans for a while…the white men," Alfred added on seeing their puzzled expressions at the word 'Europeans.' "I just made a new government for my people about two decades ago. The nations across the sea no longer have any control over me. I'm…well, I'm trying to unite the land Mother left me to guard."

Mandan pulled Alfred back into a hug and Hidatsa rested a hand on Alfred's shoulder.

"We should hold a celebration tonight," said Hidatsa. "Our lost brother has returned home to us at long last."

"I…thank you," said Alfred. "My people and I will need to stay near here for the winter. We're trying to scout the land."

"We will do everything in our power to make sure you are safe, Little Star," said Mandan. "The Sioux tribes have become very violent lately and we will not let you or your men fall into harm's way."

"I can't even begin to say how much this means to me. And…there's someone else here I think you should meet."

Alfred turned and smiled over at Louise and nodded for her to join them.

Finding out that their long-lost baby brother had taken a wife was an enormous shock for the two tribes, but they welcomed it and invited all the newcomers to join them for a feast. Alfred and Louise were given places of honor beside Mandan and Hidatsa as their kindred. Mandan even ordered some gifts to be presented to his brother and sister-in-law as a sign of his respect and affection for the young couple.

During the festivity, in which the men of the Corps smoked a ceremonial pipe with Mandan's chiefs, one of the fur-trappers who had led their party to the village began chatting with Lewis. Alfred caught snippets of the conversation as concerning possibly hiring the man, who identified himself as "Toussaint Charbonneau," as a guide for their expedition party. The fur-trapper seemed to have reached an agreement with Lewis as he seemed very satisfied when he sat down between two young, pretty native women.

"He is very reliable, I promise you," Mandan said upon noticing his younger brother had watched the exchange. "The fur-trapper Shabono. He has learned the lay of the land very well. You can trust
him with your life."

"But not with your women," Hidatsa added with a snort. "He is a bit too fond of women. In fact, I gifted him those two Shoshone girls as wives so he would leave our women alone."

"'Gifted' zem?" Louise repeated.

"They were taken as slaves in my last fight with Shoshone. If I remember correctly, they are named 'Otter Woman' and 'Bird Woman.'"

Alfred and Louise both glanced back over at Charbonneau and his two wives. The older of the two girls was silent and stone-faced, and it was blatantly obvious she was exceedingly unhappy. The other girl, who looked to be about sixteen, seemed more lively and talkative; closer observation also revealed that she was pregnant.

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**December 3rd, 1804**

The votes were in.

Thomas Jefferson had defeated Charles C. Pinckney and was officially elected to serve a second term as president of the United States of America. It hadn't even been close. Only Connecticut and Delaware had voted against Jefferson, though Maryland had some minor dissension in her electoral college with two Federalists against the nine Democratic-Republicans.

Connecticut refused to attend the celebrations at the White House, claiming that he couldn't stand the asinine Southern arrogance that had 'infested' the estate that Mr. and Mrs. Adams had worked so hard to build for the distinguished office of president.

While other Federalist states like Massachusetts and Rhode Island were disappointed that Mr. Adams had been forced to withdraw from the race early on, they felt it wasn't worth throwing a tantrum over. After all, Mr. Jefferson had proven fairly effective in his duties as president, though Massachusetts still had some reservations about the Louisiana Purchase - and the stepmother he and his siblings got as a result of it.

Of course, the more pressing concern for them, at the moment, was when Lewis and Clark would finish their expedition and return Alfred to his children. Little Ohio asked every day when his daddy was going to come home and the other states weren't sure what to tell him.

Their aunts, Oneida and Tuscarora, frequently visited to keep an eye on the states. The two tribes often felt ill-at-ease in the national capital, especially considering their growing anger at the white settlers encroaching on their lands and the fact that their brother's government did nothing to stop it. They did not mind Mr. Jefferson, though, as he always treated them with the same politeness he showed to all women, and even expressed some interest in their respective cultures. The states, however, were not entirely comfortable around their aunts - despite how kind and doting the women were, the fears and prejudices of their citizens sometimes colored the states' worldviews. While their father represented the whole of the land and people, the states were more closely linked to the non-native population that had shaped them and given them their own cultures and politics, which made it very challenging for the states, as products of societal and ethnic changes to the American landscape, to see past their differences from their father's family.

Things were certainly changing for everyone in North America. Not simply the United States, but throughout the continent. The balance of everything had been thrown off and only time would tell
February 11th, 1805

The party had been sheltering at a base camp, which they named "Fort Mandan," for the winter. It had been the first Christmas Alfred had spent without his children since before they were born. He missed them a great deal and was eager to return home to see them – after he and Louise completed their mission. Already, the expedition party was making plans for their next steps as soon as the weather turned warm again.

That day, however, Fort Mandan welcomed a new resident.

Charbonneau and his two wives had also taken up residence at the fort for the winter. Charbonneau's pregnant wife, Bird Woman, more often addressed in an anglicized version of her Hidatsa name as "Sacagawea," was currently in labor. Her sister-wife Otter Woman and a midwife from the native settlement were currently tending to her; Louise had also offered her assistance and was presently watching as the teenage girl fought back her cries of pain as the day wore on.

Louise had seen childbirth before. The nuns who had raised her focused heavily on tending to the sick, caring for orphans, and educating women, so Louise had frequently helped attend childbirths of young, frightened mothers – sometimes even **unwed** mothers. Something about this situation was different, however. The sight of the blood-soaked, purplish baby, screaming as it entered the world, left her with an odd feeling she couldn't place. Even as she handed the baby boy, little Jean Baptiste, to his mother, who smiled and offered thanks to whatever strange spirit or god she worshipped, something left Louise with a sense of disquiet.

Perhaps, even, a twinge of fear.

November 7th, 1805

They had finally reached the end.

The Pacific Ocean. Far as the eye could see, its water glittering from shafts of light that broke through the thick accumulation of grey clouds, the powerful waves crashing against the rugged, rocky shore, the great body of water stood as a testament to both the success of a long journey and to the enormity of the land which Alfred's mother had left under his care.

"It seemed like it just went on forever," Alfred said as he and Louise stood side-by-side, watching the push and pull of the water below them. "I almost thought we'd never reach the ocean."

Louise folded her hand in his.

"And, now zat you are 'ere?" she said.

"I can't believe it," Alfred said. "How much she left for me to look after. Did my mother really trust me this much that she wanted all this to be mine?"

"Not wit'out a fight," Louise said softly, her eyes turning cold.
"What was that?"

"It is not all yours yet, ma moitié. You 'ave only gotten back part of what is rightfully yours. Ze territory I brought wit' me…it already belonged to you. Alfred, mon Coeur, I must tell you somet'ing."

"What is it?"

"You remember 'ow I once told you I was not meant to exist? It was not an exaggeration. I do not know why I exist. By rights, you are ze only true nation in zese lands. I am…I am somet'ing else. I 'ave never felt a bond to zis land. To ze people, oui, but not ze land. Alfred, I am afraid. I am afraid of what it will mean when zese lands become states and zere is no need for me any longer."

"Louise, what are you saying? That you're going to…to disappear?"

"Oui, I fear so. If I am not a nation and I have not'ing to bind me to zis world, how can I stay alive?"

Alfred drew her into his arms and held her close.

"I promise you, Louise," he said, "I will do everything I can to keep you alive. As long as I live, I will make certain you do, as well. 'What wilt thou? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.'"

"The Book of Esther," Louise said softly. "Chapter cinq, verse trois. When Esther sways ze 'eart of 'er husband Ahasuerus to spare 'er people."

"And I mean it," Alfred said. "If I must sacrifice half of myself to keep you alive, I will do so. I have been on the east coast so long, I suppose I'm more like them, and you have been with the Louisianans so long that you more easily represent the west. It isn't the first time one nation has been in two parts. I don't see why we can't make similar arrangements."

The two of them stood there for a long time, simply holding each other as the salty air rushed across the great expanse of ocean and swept about them like some mighty agent of God come to seal yet another covenant.

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**Late 1806**

It was strange to be back in New Orleans, but Alfred felt it was important that they see how things were getting along and if Louise's people were adjusting to the changes they'd been through recently. After the Corps of Discovery had completed its primary mission of reaching the Pacific (though they were, regrettably, unable to find the Northwest Passage they desired), the party began the long trek homewards. Alfred and Louise had split from the group when they reached the Mississippi and had, instead, sailed down to New Orleans where they planned to catch a ship headed north via the Atlantic coast.

They were walking along Royal Street when Alfred spotted a familiar figure and began waving cheerfully.

"Mr. Aaron Burr, sir!" he called out.

The man tensed and turned a worried gaze over to Alfred…America, the nation he'd risked his own life for once, the nation he was practically a fugitive from, the nation that he had chosen to betray
with his schemes.

Louise had noticed Burr's unease and was watching him with narrowed eyes. She'd learned enough about treachery to recognize a guilty man when she saw one. She did not say anything, however; choosing to wait and see how Mr. Burr decided to react.

"Alfred, my boy," Burr said with obvious nervousness. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"We could ask you the same thing," Alfred said, oblivious to the uncomfortable atmosphere. "I would've thought you'd be in New York, fighting with Hamilton over some policy or other, as usual."

Louise noticed that Burr was beginning to sweat and was, ever-so-slightly, edging back from Alfred.

"How is everyone back in the east?" Alfred continued merrily. "Everything right as rain? No sudden deaths or major international incidents?"

"Yes, indeed," Burr said, visibly shaking. "Everything…everything is well."

"That's a relief. Last year, I could've sworn something terrible must've happened. Felt like I took a bullet in my ribs."

"I-Is that so? I…I cannot imagine what might have brought such a thing about."

"It was a wonderful surprise to see you, here, Mr. Burr. It's a weight off my mind to know that everything back east is all right and that everyone is doing well and that my children haven't plunged us into any international conflicts in my absence. I cannot wait to get home and find everything as perfectly content and peaceful as when I left."

Burr looked to be on the verge of a panic-attack, especially as Louise's gaze bore into him with weighty accusation.

"W-well, it was a marvelous twist of fate running into you both like this," Burr said hastily. "But, I am afraid I have a meeting with Governor Wilkinson that cannot be delayed. Mr. Jones, Mrs. Jones," he added, tipping his hat politely and hurrying away.

"Zat was most peculiar," Louise said, her brow arched in suspicion.

"Oh, that's just Aaron Burr," Alfred said. "He's always been a bit of an oddball. A good man at heart, though."

"Is zat right?"

"Yeah. Some of his ideas have been a bit…well, I'd call them 'ahead of our time.' When I last saw him, he was pushing New York's legislature to grant voting rights to women. And I know he's been petitioning for the abolition of slavery since the end of the Revolution."

Louise made a contemplative hum and nodded.

"So, you do not consider 'is presence 'ere to be suspicious?" she said.

"Suspicious? Not at all. I'm sure he's just on a political assignment from President Jefferson."

"Ah, oui, we must congratulate Monsieur Jefferson on 'is triumphant reelection, when we return."

"As if there was any doubt he'd get a second term. Jefferson's brilliant. I'll bet things are running as
smoothly as when Washington was in office."

"Mon cher, was not your President Washington's administration plagued by numerous domestic and international problems?"

"None that I can remember."

Several weeks later...

Alfred and Louise arrived at the White House just in time to see an angry Englishman storm out of the building, calling President Jefferson every unkind word under the sun. The man shoved past Alfred and Louise, raving his abject disgust for the United States and its people.

Alfred and Louise both turned back to face the front door of the White House, where they saw Thomas Jefferson in casual clothes and bedroom slippers standing there with barely-concealed amusement.

"Some gentlemen have no sense of humor," Jefferson pondered aloud. Then, upon noticing Alfred and Louise standing there, broke into a delighted grin and rushed out to greet them. "Alfred, my lad. And dear Louise, how well you look," he said, giving her hand a kiss in courteous manner. "Travel has done well for you both, I believe."

"Mr. Jefferson, who was that man?" Alfred said bemusedly.

"Oh, that was Mr. Anthony Merry, the British ambassador," Jefferson said pleasantly. "A very high-strung individual, I dare say."

"And what was that all about?"

"The man has no sense of diplomacy. And he dares call himself an ambassador! I was perfectly polite to him when he first arrived, but he was so determined to hate me from the outset I saw no reason why I should feign politeness with him any longer. Honestly, always complaining about how my manner of dress was some form of slight to him."

Considering Mr. Jefferson had a severe lack of fashion sense, in general, it was not exactly surprising that the stuffy British diplomat took offense. Jefferson often appeared somewhat unkempt and casual, it was just one of his little eccentric quirks, something he also applied to his social engagements (he called it "pell-mell"). Of course, it was clear that not everyone saw it that way.

"And I tried so hard to play peacemaker, too," Jefferson added. "I even invited Mr. Merry and that virago of a wife of his to a dinner party with the chargé d'affaires —"

"Wait, you invited the British ambassador to dinner with a French dignitary?" Alfred said in disbelief. "At a time when England and France are trying to rip each other's throats out?"

"I felt it my duty as president to attempt to broker international cooperation."

"And did it work in any way?"

"...Not as such, no."

"Mon dieu," said Louise in disbelief. "What else 'ave we missed?"
"We have had an enormous success in combating the Barbary pirate threat," Jefferson pointed out.

"Well, zat sounds fine."

"...And I have declared a non-importation policy against Great Britain," Jefferson said rapidly.

"Anyone for some coffee?"

"Wait, what?" Alfred said. "A ban on imports? That will kill our international commerce. Mr. Jefferson, what were you thinking?"

"I had no choice, Alfred," Jefferson said, giving Alfred a pleading look. "Our...relationship with Britain has soured considerably."

"What about the Jay Treaty? Isn't that supposed to keep the peace with England?"

"Alfred, it is not that simple. A piece of paper is not going to prevent the British from acting so deplorably towards us."

"What could England have done to make banning all trade with him necessary?"

Jefferson rubbed his forehead tiredly and sighed in resignation.

"Alfred, as you pointed out before, England and France have been attempting to throttle one another," he said. "We have tried to remain neutral in this, but, I'm afraid, that is not acceptable to the British. The French are more understanding, but not by much. The British, though...the British have been attacking our merchant ships. Indiscriminately and ruthlessly. All to prevent our trade with France."

"Zat is terrible," said Louise. "What right do zose...zose cochons 'ave to attack neutral ships and ransack ze property of our people?"

"I wish that were as far as they went, but, unfortunately, the situation is even worse. Not only have they been looting our ships, the British Navy has been abducting sailors from the ships and forcing them to serve on their own."

Alfred went strangely quiet. He clenched his hands by his sides. How dare he? Alfred thought. How dare he take my people?! How dare he force my people, my citizens, to do his dirty work?! Despite being independent, it seemed that England still had no regard for the rights of America's people. It was bad enough that England allowed press-gangs to abduct and more-or-less enslave his own people on his own lands, but that he saw it as within his power to do so to America's people, as well, was not something Alfred could overlook -- and something he doubted he would ever forgive.

Louise seemed to pick up on his feelings because her own expression was marked with pure outrage.

"Zis cannot be permitted," Louise exclaimed. "We ought to 'ave a Navy of our own! A force to thrash zose Britons if zey come near our people."

"I have already been making plans," said Jefferson. "You must understand, though. I have no wish to plunge us into a war. And this was the only non-violent action I felt I could reasonably take."

"I understand," Alfred said somberly.

"Well, I do not," said Louise. "We must take zis fight to ze British. Zey must be taught zat ze United States 'as no tolerance for such monstrous violations of our rights."
"And what would you have me retaliate with, Madam?" said Jefferson. "We are not currently in any state to challenge Great Britain on the battlefield or at sea."

"Is zat what you thought when you were fighting to gain your independence? What 'appened to ze man who spat fury against Britain and all zose who stood with it?"

Jefferson did not answer and Alfred was suddenly painfully aware of how much older the author of the Declaration had grown since the day he wrote those powerful words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Jefferson was by no means the hearty man in his thirties he had been when he put pen to paper and wrote the most important document in America's history. He was an old man, now. Far spryer and more well-humored than others of his age, but no longer the hot-blooded revolutionary who wrote so passionately the words he was too shy to speak aloud.

Jefferson had always been a living mess of contradictions in Alfred's eyes. The man could write such stormy, fearsome words, yet quailed at having to say them before a crowd. He decried the power of centralized government, yet many of his policies, including the Louisiana Purchase which had bound Alfred and Louise together, were the result of him flexing his executive power and increasing federal authority. Even Jefferson's views on slavery were so bizarre and contradictory it was difficult to understand what he believed – he denounced slavery as evil and once even called for universal abolition, yet his wealth was sustained by slaves working on his plantation and it was an open secret that he'd taken a slave girl, Sally Hemings, as a mistress (and was likely the father of the woman's children).

"Let's leave these matters, for now," Alfred said at last. "We've been away for much longer than I thought we would and I have been dying to see the children again. I hope they've been all right while we were gone?"

"For the most part," Jefferson said, turning to lead them inside. "Of course, after that incident with Burr shooting Hamilton, New York has been exceedingly restless – he even asked me to indict Burr for murder."

Alfred froze in his tracks.

"Burr did WHAT?!"

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December 31st, 1806 – January 1st, 1807

It was the first formal gala Alfred had ever personally hosted.

Louise had insisted that it was important for them to properly socialize with the people in charge of running the nation. Naturally, President Jefferson and Vice President George Clinton were invited, as well as James Madison, Chief Justice John Marshall, and a number of other high-ranking national authorities. Most of the people there knew about what Alfred, Louise, and Alfred's children actually were – despite George Washington's secret policy of keeping the states hidden from the outside world, the U.S. government was unusually open with its own officials about the existence of personifications (at least when compared with other nations). Of course, every person who knew about them was made to sign a national secrets agreement.

Alfred had to admit that the evening was considerably different than he'd expected it would be. He'd
never really been much of a party-goer or socialite before he met Louise. In fact, Alfred had been very timid as a child, something he attributed to the isolation England had kept him in for so long. And, being such an earthy, plain-living individual, Alfred saw very little point in the fancy get-togethers of the elite with their stuffy clothes and crystal glassware – one of the points of contention he’d once had with England.

Now, however, Alfred was beginning to understand. People did not attend these elegant dinner parties for fun; they did so in order to navigate the political and social spheres and to make connections with like-minded fellows, as well as to observe other people’s interactions and to get some really good gossip.

It still left something of a sour taste in his mouth, but at least now he knew why.

To be honest, Alfred would much rather be spending New Year’s Eve with his wife and children in a quiet, simple, family party. He still remembered how they had all charged him when he and Louise returned after their journey with Lewis and Clark and begged him to ‘never, ever leave them again.’

Of course, when Louise looked at him with those beautiful, silvery eyes of hers, his resolve completely melted. She wanted to host a formal dinner, so that is what they would do. He placed the reins utterly in her hands for the evening – after all, as lady of the house in that day and age, it was Louise’s responsibility to manage household and social affairs. She certainly had a natural flair for such things, Alfred observed as he watched her flit about the room in her best evening dress to chat with their distinguished guests.

There was something that bothered him, however. While everyone in that room knew who and what Alfred and Louise were, Alfred detected a measure of coldness from some of the guests that was being directed towards Louise. Alfred had seen similar looks directed at another person very dear to his heart, before – it was the same way that a number of people had looked at his darling Georgia. As if they thought she was deficient in some way and should not even be in their presence. Louise, if she noticed these antagonistic looks, did not react to them in any way and merely continued to fulfill her role as hostess.

Still, Alfred felt exceptionally off-put. He could only hope the new year brought with it a brighter future. After all, plans were in the works for considerable change.

June 30th, 1807

Alfred was sulking.

He was not normally one to sulk, but he felt incredibly justified in this case. Eight days earlier, an utter travesty had been perpetrated against his citizens in the waters off the coast of Norfolk, Virginia – his little Virginia, herself, had come to him in tears, insisting that her father do something about the unprovoked attack against one of her frigates. It seemed that one of England’s warships, the HMS Leopard, had ‘accidentally’ stumbled into U.S. waters and hailed the American ship USS Chesapeake, whereupon the British captain ordered the American ship to submit to a search, which the Americans refused, leading to an attack which persisted even after the American crew had struck the ship’s colors in surrender.

If England didn’t stop with his blatant violations of American neutrality, Alfred refused to be held accountable should a violent retaliation become necessary for the protection of his people. And
Alfred's people seemed to echo his sentiments. In fact, President Jefferson had commented to Alfred on the public outcry that, "Never since the Battle of Lexington have I seen this country in such a state of exasperation as at present, and even that did not produce such unanimity."

There was a notable tension in Alfred's household, as well. Louise was becoming irritated that Alfred had yet to do anything about the actions of the British – not only at sea, but also inland at the British forts which had not been relinquished by the British government, as per the agreement in the Treaty of Paris.

Neutrality, it seemed, came with a heavy price tag and a large number of headaches.

"Are you going to do somet'ing about zis?" a voice said from the doorway of Alfred's study. Alfred turned and, unsurprisingly, found Louise standing there, her arms folded and a severe expression on her face. "Zis is not just about safety, anymore, it is a matter of honor, now."

"Louise, my hands are tied," Alfred said calmly. "We are still not in any condition to be picking fights with England."

"And where will it end, hmm? When you are shackled back into ze chains of a colony, along wit' me and ze children? And what will your old friend England do to us? 'e may want you back, but ze children and I are not'ing to 'im. We are disposable."

"Louise, England isn't like that. He would never –"

"Oh, oui, England is not so bad a person," Louise said with a cold sarcasm. "Certainly, 'e is not someone to fight for independence from. Non, non, we would all do so much better if we acted like a thief, kidnapper, and tyrant like 'im."

Alfred wanted desperately to stand up and yell something in England's defense, but found he couldn't bring himself to do so. What Louise had said cut right to the bone. Had Alfred not fought tooth-and-nail to get away from England? Was Alfred not still haunted by the memories of the pain and anger of his people over the abuse they had suffered from England's governance and his attempts to stamp out the stirrings of rebellion?

God, just the thought of the British prison-ships, the "floating hells," where England had locked up any man he even remotely suspected of being a traitor was enough to turn Alfred's stomach. To say nothing of the vicious cruelty inflicted against the people, particularly the women, of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania when the British forces occupied major sites in those colonies. While no one's hands were entirely clean of atrocities in the Revolution – not even, Alfred was sad to say, some extremist Patriot factions – the fact of the matter was that Alfred was not about to tolerate further crimes against his people by a foreign power.

Alfred let out a thoughtful sigh and rose to his feet. He paced the room for a few steps before turning and facing Louise, who still watched him with that hard, resolute expression. Alfred approached and took her hand in his.

"Don't worry, darling," he said. "I'll begin making the arrangements."

January 1st, 1808

"I congratulate you, fellow-citizens, on the approach of the period at which you may interpose your authority constitutionally, to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation
in those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending
inhabitants of Africa, and which the morality, the reputation, and the best interests of our country,
have long been eager to proscribe."

Everyone applauded as Mr. Jefferson repeated his words from December 2nd, 1806. While some of
Jefferson's popularity had waned in the face of the passing of the Embargo Act, banning all trade
with Britain and France, the effecting of the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which Congress
had approved in March of the last year, brought a much-needed sigh of relief to the United States.
And to Alfred in particular.

The irony that it was a slave-owner who pushed such an act through Congress was lost on no one.

Regardless, the hope of ending slavery in the United States had long been a pressing issue. In fact,
after the Revolution, there had been hundreds of cases of slave-owners granting freedom to their
slaves as most Americans considered it hypocritical to own fellow human beings whilst preaching
about liberty and equality. This widespread practice of manumission had actually only slowed down
in the last ten to fifteen years. If Alfred had his way, there would not be a single enslaved soul in his
nation by morning light that New Year's day – convincing the rest of his people, especially the
government, that such was the path of progress was the only snag.

Lately, Alfred had noticed that many of the southern plantation owners had been digging in their
heels more firmly about slavery. While it had always been a hot and contentious issue, merely
mentioning the subject seemed to set a number of people off, nowadays.

"Well, that's one more step for a brighter future," Alfred said to Louise as he took her by the arm and
directed them both towards the front door of the White House. "The Atlantic slave trade has been an
ugly mark on the world for long enough."

"I agree," Louise said calmly as Alfred helped her into her winter cloak. "Ze importing of slaves to
our land needed to be stopped. But do you really believe ze government can enforce such a policy?"

"Why shouldn't they? We've officially severed ties with the slave trade and importing slaves from
Africa is now a criminal offence."

"Yes, ma moitié. It is illegal to import slaves from Africa. What of Florida, ze Caribbean islands, or
Canada? None of zem are under our control and zere is no such prohibition."

"Well, we can definitely rule out Canada. My brother's still with England and England outlawed the
slave trade just last year, as well, so I figure the ban would apply to all of England's colonies."

A moue of distaste crossed Louise's face when Alfred mentioned his brother and his former
-guardian. Alfred could hardly blame her. Since their argument about the possibility of going to war
with England, Alfred had begun to be converted to Louise's view of the situation. She was becoming
increasingly worried about the "Northern threat," as she called Canada and the British troops that
occupied his lands, and Alfred, himself, was developing a strong sense of antipathy towards the
brother who had turned a cold shoulder when Alfred asked him for help during the Revolution.

"Fine," Louise conceded. "But zat still leaves ze Spanish territories. Some unscrupulous individuals
could transport slaves into Florida and sell zem in our southern regions. And zat does not even
account for direct smuggling."

Alfred offered his hand to his wife to help her into their coach. Once they were both settled inside,
brun beneath a set of heavy fur blankets to keep away the cold, Alfred waved out the window to
signal the driver to proceed.
"Well, whatever the case, the point will be moot as soon as we get a bill to ban slavery as a whole," Alfred said.

"Alfred, mon cher, I 'ave some concerns in zat regard," Louise continued.

"Really? What kind of concerns?"

"It is about zis new 'abolition movement.' I am worried zeir goals are not realistic."

"In what way?"

"I do agree zat slavery is très mal, but is banning ze practice outright truly wise? Will such a move not cause too much upheaval?"

"I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying you don't approve of ending slavery?"

"Alfred, zat is not what I said!" Louise protested. "I merely wish you to take stock of ze repercussions if you try to force your government to abolish slavery. What will 'appen if you release thousands of enslaved people into ze streets wit' no money, no education, and no means of support? Most will be reduced to abject poverty, living in squalor and maybe finding work as hired domestics or farmhands – ze same labor zey do already – and left to suffer exploitation from ze wealthy and ze politically powerful. And, even zen, left to compete for work and opportunities wit' impoverished whites and immigrants, which will sow seeds of prejudice and violence between ze different groups."

Alfred sat in stunned silence for a moment.

"That's…that's a very bleak vision of the future," he said. "How did you come up with that?"

"Because I 'ave seen it already!" Louise snapped. "Ze government of New Orleans constantly schemed to turn whites, blacks, and natives against each other so zey could keep zem under zeir control. Zey made ze whites and blacks believe ze natives were bloodthirsty sauvages, zey made ze whites and natives believe ze blacks were stupid and violent, and zey made ze blacks and natives believe ze whites were cruel and oppressive. It will just 'appen again and again ze more you fight against it."

"They actually turned them all against each other?" Alfred said in disbelief. "Why would they do that?"

"Alfred, mon cher, as long as zere is power to be 'ad, zere are people who will do anyt'ing necessary to keep it. Ze only way to end injustice is to convince ze people in power zat it is not in zeir own best interests."

"This is going to be a nightmare, isn't it?" Alfred said, tiredly rubbing his face.

"Now you understand…zat is why we must be cautious if we wish to take any steps to end slavery. I 'ave no doubt it will simply die out on its own, but zere is not'ing stopping us from hastening ze practice to its demise. As long as we approach zis wit' caution and diplomacy and keep electing good men like Monsieur Jefferson, zere is no reason why slavery should not be ended in ze next fifty years."

To my friend, Mr. Alfred Jones,
I am exceedingly delighted to hear from you again and hope that you are doing well. I have missed the short correspondence we had. Though I do understand that various events in these last few years have likely kept you otherwise occupied. I hope we may communicate more often now, and I certainly anticipate a future, official visit to your country so that we might meet face-to-face, once again.

I would also like to offer my sincerest sympathies in regards to the treatment you have been receiving at the hands of England and his navy. If I were in yours shoes, I would have declared war at the first act against my people. Insults such as this are a threat to a nation's very being and it would not be wise to allow such actions to go unpunished. Just a friendly thought…

"What are you reading, ma moitié?"

"A letter from an old friend," Alfred replied as Louise settled herself beside him on the sofa. "His English has improved since he last wrote to me."

"Who is 'Ivan Braginsky'?" Louise said with a curious frown. "Zat is an odd name."

"He's like us. He's the personification of Russia."

"And 'e is your friend?"

"Well, yeah, I guess he is. We started writing to each other around the time I started my Revolution. I saw him very briefly in 1763, when he was ensuring some of his merchants were able to set up a… trade operation with some of my people in Boston. England was furious when he found out I'd broken the 'no contact with other nations' rule, but I was just happy to have a new friend who was like me to talk to. So, I started writing him. I think, maybe, it's why he refused to help England during the Revolution."

"Zis Russia sounds like a decent enough fellow. Would you like me to 'elp you write a response?"

"Would you? I'd really appreciate it."

Louise moved over to the desk and took out a fresh sheet of paper. As Alfred dictated his response, Louise carefully jotted down what he said and suggested a few things to include. When Alfred began to talk about the states, however, Louise stopped him.

"Alfred, my love, do you believe it wise to mention ze children?" she said.

"Why not?"

"Well, 'ow many nations do you know zat talk about zeir own children?"

"None, but I just thought…I just assumed the other nations don't have any."

"Yet, you have children for each of your states, non? Why is it zat you should 'ave children and ze ot'er nations do not?"

"So, what, you think it's rude to talk to other nations about children?"

"Can you think of another explanation?"

Alfred furrowed his brow in thought and then nodded in acceptance of her speculation. Louise smiled softly to herself…Alfred might not know about the national secrets agreement, but she would be damned before she allowed the existence of the children to leak out.
March 9th, 1809

Five years.

It had been five years since Alfred and Louise stood in that hall and swore the marriage vows. It had been five years now, and only five days ago that the newest president, James Madison, was sworn into office. Times were changing, and changing fast.

Despite whatever awkwardness or hesitation there had been at the start, the Jones family had entered into a regular order, of a kind. And Louise had become a strong fixture in that order. While some of the states had been noticeably cold towards her since the beginning and their sentiments had yet to thaw, Louise had become particularly skilled at her role as the family's matriarch and was now much-acustomed to wrangling the often wayward children in spite of the hostility she still received – largely from the New England states.

"All right, my darlings, is everyone present?" Louise said as she lined the children up for a stroll through town. They were currently residing at their home in Charleston, South Carolina. "Where are Thomas and John?"

"Connecticut and Massachusetts refused to come downstairs, Mama," Georgia replied. Like most of the southern states, Georgia had taken to addressing Louise as her mother quite quickly.

"New Hampshire, here, nearly joined 'em, too," New York said, jabbing a finger at his sister.

"You've got to be jokin'," South Carolina said sharply. "This ain't even half as bad as some of the small towns up north."

"Jessamine, chérie," Louise said patiently. "What 'ave I told you about saying 'ain't'?"

"That it ain't a word."

Louise gave her stepdaughter an unamused look, but was interrupted from saying anything further as Alfred joined the family party.

"We all ready to go?" he asked.

"Almost all of us," Louise said. "Your two eldest boys refuse to join in wit' ze rest of ze family."

Alfred shook his head and turned towards the grand stairway.

"Thomas, John!" he called up. "You get down here, right this instant!"

"Go away, Demo-rat!" Connecticut answered back. His temper had been getting worse lately at the expanding power of the Democratic-Republican party, as he was largely a Federalist state, and he frequently accused the rest of his family of being little more than pawns of liberal-minded, anti-establishment 'hoi polloi.' He and Massachusetts had even threatened to secede from the Union over some of the policies the Democratic-Republicans had pushed through Congress.

"Well, I gave them a chance," Alfred said evenly. He then rolled up the sleeves of his blue overcoat and marched up the stairs. There was a loud scuffling and shouting for a few minutes before Alfred returned, carrying his two eldest sons under either arm as if they were merely sacks of flour.

"I must protest, this is most unseemly!" Connecticut squawked as he and Massachusetts struggled to slip out other their father's grasp. "I insist that you relinquish us, this instant!"

"You can come on the walk quietly or kicking and screaming," Alfred said with a wry smile. "Either way, you're both going to join in and be part of the family."

"But I hate the family."

"Yeah, this family sucks," Massachusetts added.

That earned them a round of glares from the rest of their siblings who were dressed up and squared away. Not even Rhode Island had put up a fuss at going on stroll, and he was usually the most difficult state to get an agreement from in any situation.

"We ready?" said Alfred, stooping down so Virginia could help him put his hat on as his hands were occupied with restraining his sons – after all, no respectable man in that time would be caught dead without a hat on outdoors.

"I believe so," Louise replied, picking up a parasol from the stand by the door. "Shall we?"

With that, the family departed from the house. The neighborhood in which they lived was filled with a number of old, lavish estates. The house they occupied was, itself, particularly grand – the property had once belonged to a Loyalist family who had abandoned it during the Revolution in the face of aggression from Patriot neighbors; it had subsequently been seized by the local authorities and auctioned off at a fraction of its value. It was hardly an odd occurrence, and South Carolina had assuaged her father's doubts about purchasing it by stating that if the original owners didn't care enough to fight for it then it might as well belong to a family who could appreciate the sanctity of one's home and one's nation.

"Good day," Alfred said to some passersby who had stopped to stare at the odd spectacle of him lugging two of his large brood under his arms.

"Race ya to the end of the block," North Carolina said, playfully shoving South Carolina before charging ahead.

South Carolina practically snarled as she shot after her, unable to resist the challenge. This prompted New Jersey and Pennsylvania to start up their own race. Georgia and Virginia shook their heads disapprovingly at the spectacle; the two girls had shown, in the past few years, a great reluctance to participate in the roughhousing of their more boisterous siblings, especially since their very elegant and ladylike stepmother had become a strong role-model for acceptable behavior to them – the two girls had even started putting their hair up like Louise did and wearing dresses that resembled the fine modern, high-waisted, empire-silhouette fashions that Louise wore while many of their sisters still pranced about in outdated 1790s dresses.

"It is so lovely today," Louise said, turning to smile coyly at Alfred. "Zis was an excellent idea, ma moitié. Such a splendid way to spend our anniversary."

Massachusetts and Connecticut made disgusted sounds.

As the family continued their perambulation through town, headed in the direction of the waterfront, Louise took on a pensive expression. Her eyes followed the children very closely, but not just with the normal protective watchfulness.

"Alfred, my dear," she said. "We 'ave been married five years, now, correct?"
"Lost track of the years already?" Alfred said teasingly.

"Non, non," Louise replied, chuckling. "I simply meant...oh, I am being silly. I just assumed, wit' us having been married zis long..."

Alfred tried to determine what was on her mind with the way her gaze kept flitting between him and the children. However, his old difficulty with reading the atmosphere came into play and it was practically impossible for him to connect the dots in this situation. Finally, New Hampshire decided to put him out of his misery.

"Oh, for God's sake, you daft man," the sole female New England state said sharply. "She wants more children in the family. Hell if I know why."

"Mind your language, Northerner," Virginia snapped at New Hampshire.

"Louise?" said Alfred, who was blushing by that point. "Is that true?"

"Well, it 'as been five years," said Louise, who looked incredibly embarrassed. "Actually, never mind, forget I said anyt'ing."

Alfred would have pressed to continue the conversation, but was stopped when the Carolinas called for the rest of them to hurry up. An awkward silence fell between Alfred and Louise. While he might have been obtuse about the matter, at first, Alfred could now see that the subject of having children with each other was something which was clearly bothering her. It was a confusing issue, as well, considering that Alfred's children thusfar had all been 'born' from him in some strange, supernatural way he still couldn't explain upon each state's ratification of the Constitution, making it a puzzle about whether he and Louise would even be able to have children in the same way as humans or if any future children would follow the original pattern.

As they continued on their way to the waterfront, Alfred made a silent decision to discuss with his boss whether there were any plans for the next state in the Union.

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December 6th, 1810

The girl refused to stand down.

A scrawny, sickly, half-starved little thing brandishing an old musket. She couldn't have been older than twelve in physical age, but she was the only one who had rejected Claiborne's admonishment to surrender as his men took control in St. Francisville and the second division was likely at Baton Rouge, by that point. Even as Governor Skipworth ordered his Floridian troops to stand down, the girl could not be budged from her post beside the flagpole, bearing the West Florida sigil of a blue flag with a single, five-pointed, white star.

"If I must die at this flagstaff, then I will," the girl shouted.

Claiborne just shook his head and turned to where Alfred and Louise stood by, dressed in the current U.S. Army attire which was modeled on the French style with some small alterations. Louise, of course, had personally sewn her own uniform as nearly identical to that of her husband's, save that her uniform possessed a skirt and was fitted in an appropriate manner for a lady to wear.

"Alfred, I do not suppose you could convince her to stand down?" Claiborne asked hopefully.
"Zis Republic of West Florida is most tenacious," Louise thought aloud. "Zough, I suppose zat is not really in our favor, in zis case."

"She's just a kid," Alfred said. "She's scared."

"President Madison gave his orders," Claiborne added. "The Republic of West Florida will never be recognized as an independent nation and the land rightfully belongs to the United States."

Alfred was deeply unsettled by this. He remembered only too clearly the day he watched Vermont fade away with Alfred's promise that he would bring him back. This was sure to be considerably worse, as there was no surety in promising to create the 'state of West Florida' to the little republic who appeared to be desperately clinging to life. It must have been terrifying for her, being born in the midst of a rebellion against the Spanish and having her lands annexed by the U.S. about a month later and then fighting for almost two more months to keep her status as a nation, only for everything to fall apart now.

"We don't want to fight you, young lady," Alfred called out to the girl.

"That's your problem, then," she shouted back. "I am not giving up my independence."

"If you just come with us quietly, we can work something out."

"I know about you, Mr. Jones. I know what you are. I have no desire to shackle myself into your little empire. I've had more than enough of that with the British and the Spanish."

"The United States isn't like that. We support the rights and freedoms of our people."

The girl gave a derisive snort and pointed the musket at him.

"Forgive me if I have my doubts," she said.

"It doesn't need to end this way. West Florida could have a place among the states."

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on it. There's only one way this can end, Mr. Jones, and that's with someone buried six feet deep in God's country."

There was a sharp tension as Alfred tried to stare down West Florida while she kept her musket pointed directly at him. Alfred tried to cautiously edge closer, hoping to speak more directly with her – maybe, with some negotiating, this could all work out peacefully and he could, at the very least, try to convince his boss to let the poor girl come back as a state. The Republic of West Florida, however, must have mistaken his movements for a sign of aggression, as she suddenly charged towards him with the bayonet of her musket clearly pointing towards one aim.

A shot rang out.

Alfred flinched for a moment, but looked back as he realized nothing had hit him. Instead, West Florida had been stopped dead in her tracks, a bloom of red spreading across the front of the loose cotton shirt she wore. The girl dropped to her knees, the musket clattering on the ground, and took a gasping, wheezing breath as blood bubbled past her lips. Alfred, horrified, rushed forward on instinct and tried to help her. He supported her as she collapsed from the blood loss and shock, and Alfred was finally able to get a good look at the little rebel republic.

She really was very frail and Alfred questioned whether or not she'd eaten anything in recent memory. Her tan skin had a yellowish pallor to it, her bright green eyes were marred by lack of sleep, and her thick brown hair was matted and unkempt. Everything about this just screamed to
Alfred that it was neither right nor just that an innocent child had been put through such suffering and had her life taken away, too.

There would be no coming back from this for West Florida. Whoever had shot her snatched away any possibility of her life being saved. She was too close to dissolution to survive a wound which only full nations could return from after a brief, death-like interlude. But the Republic of West Florida was not a full nation, not even close, and there was no failsafe of statehood for her like there had been for Vermont. It was the end for her.

Alfred glanced up to try and see who had fired the shot, but everyone seemed to be as confused and panicked as he was. Louise rushed over with some cloths and a flask of whiskey the field surgeon had on-hand.

"Is…is she…?" Louise stammered.

Alfred turned to the bleeding child in his arms as she gave out a soft moan, her eyes drifting closed and her body falling limp. He didn't even know her human name, but he couldn't help but feel his heart breaking for the ill-fated Republic of West Florida. Had destiny been kinder to her, she would have been welcomed into a warm and loving home.

It was a painful reminder to Alfred just how fragile life was, and how precious.

November 8th, 1811

My dear Louise,

I hope this letter finds you well. I hope to return home very soon, as things have been exceptionally brutal here in Indiana. I have just returned to Fort Harrison and we have a considerable number of wounded after yesterday's confrontation with Tecumseh's army at Prophetstown, near the Tippecanoe River. Rest assured that I'm fine; though, as I'm sure you're already aware, I am still deeply troubled at the thought of having had to fire on my people. My sister, Shawnee, and my brother, Ho-Chunk, were right at the front of the opposing force, but their leader was, himself, not there – it seems he was away on a recruiting mission, from what we have learned.

I am not entirely certain if this battle was a victory or not. While we managed to route our opponents and have ensured they will have no reason to return by confiscating anything of value from their base at Prophetstown, something about this whole situation doesn't sit well with me. It's more than the unease I felt about fighting against members of my own family. Many of the munitions and metal goods, such as the cookware we found, are all of English manufacture. How did English-made goods find their way this far out when we are boycotting trade with Britain?

The only explanation I can come up with is that England has been encouraging attacks on the settlers and providing the tribes with supplies to do so through the troops he has yet to remove from our land. If news of this gets out, I doubt there will be any remaining objections to a declaration of war against Great Britain.

I hope everything at home is all right and that the children aren't too upset by my absence. I wish communication was better as I did not receive the letters you all sent last month until a few days ago. I look forward to a swift return home and am eager to hear about this suspicion you mentioned in your last letter. If anything is wrong, I promise to do everything I can to make it right.

All my love,
Alfred

Louise smiled at the children as she finished reading the letter. Little Ohio let out a delighted squeal and started bouncing up and down at the news that his daddy was coming home. Some of the states started chattering about throwing a 'welcome home' party while others began to argue about the political ramifications of the news their father had just sent.

Through it all, Louise simply sat in her chair beside the fire. Idly, she brought a hand up to rest against a small bump protruding slightly at the front of her loose gown. As long as Alfred came home safely, that would be enough for her.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I was tired of the whole "the Confederacy is America's little brother/sister/child" trope. So, I took it in a new direction. She starts out as the Louisiana Territory (formerly French Louisiana/Spanish Louisiana) but becomes the personification for the whole of the South. Louisiana was under the control of Spain at the time of America's revolution and the Louisianans participated in numerous actions against the British forces under the command of Bernardo de Gálvez. Also, I felt it important that Louise have a mixed-race appearance; of the non-native population in Louisiana at the time of the Purchase, at least half the population was enslaved Africans (and that's not counting the "free people of color").

Casa Calvo did not like Americans and tried to prevent U.S. involvement in Louisiana. James Wilkinson (who was involved in a lot of shifty dealings with Spain) also attempted to negotiate secret agreements him to reestablish Spanish control in Louisiana, though Claiborne prevented any further collaboration by banishing Casa Calvo from the region. Wilkinson later tried to conspire with Aaron Burr to take control of Mexico, though Wilkinson ended up trying to erase any evidence connecting him to Burr after Burr's plot was discovered. Also, July 11th 1804 was when Aaron Burr shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel.

William Claiborne was the first elected governor of the state of Louisiana and made enormous strides in easing the tensions between the Louisianans and the U.S. government. The Louisianans had been very distrustful of the U.S. when Claiborne took governorship over the territory, as they saw the Louisiana Purchase as a violation of their rights (I guess they were sick of France and Spain selling them back and forth without consulting them) and were wary of Claiborne as he was young, inexperienced, and spoke no French. Claiborne also retained the services of the "free people of color" in the militia and honored them with a ceremonial flag and unit colors, which shocked the white elites and eventually resulted in Claiborne being challenged to a duel. Claiborne also granted pardons to slaves involved in the 1811 German Coast Uprising.

March 9th-10th, Three Flags Day, marks when Spain turned over all remaining Louisiana lands to France which then went to the U.S.

Ma moitié – French endearment meaning "my half" or "my [other] half."

The wedding rite is taken from The Book of Common Prayer. I'm an Anglo-Catholic/Anglican, the prayer book was pretty standard for the day as there were quite a
lot of Anglicans (though evangelical Protestantism was always very popular, especially
due to the role of Protestant ministers in pushing the Patriot cause).

People think the Puritans hated sex. Quite the contrary. They believed you should have
as much sex as possible within marriage in order to have lots of babies and to reflect the
bond between Christ and his Church (personally, though, I think they just said that
because sex was the only fun thing they were allowed to do).

Jefferson discovered the remains of prehistoric giant ground sloths. When Lewis and
Clark left for their expedition, Jefferson told them to keep an eye out for giant sloths.
While Lewis and Clark were on their expedition, the First Barbary War was raging and,
in July of that same year, the U.S. Navy launched an attack on Tripoli. America was
allied with Sweden and Sicily in the conflict. Jefferson has been noted for owning a
Koran, something which many people in his day criticized him for, but, considering the
fact that he got embroiled in conflicts with Muslim nations, is it any wonder he wanted
to learn about his enemy? (Hmm, this all sounds very familiar, doesn’t it?). Thomas
Jefferson also introduced macaroni and cheese to the United States and constructed his
own device to make pasta (he would, apparently, serve the dish at all his dinner parties
and it annoyed the hell out of his colleagues who thought it was "weird"). He also
absolutely despised the British ambassador and did everything he could to annoy him.

Jefferson did contribute a lot to sparking the War of 1812, but, again, it was mostly the
Brits’ fault for kidnapping U.S. citizens. It turns out, one of my ancestors was one of
those sailors who was impressed into the British Navy (and he even lost an arm during
his forced service). Hey, if my mother can hate Aaron Burr for trying to scam her many-
greats-grandfather in a shady business deal, I can still be mad about impressment, okay?

Also, yes, Washington really did force Jefferson and Hamilton to go on a fishing trip
with him once.
Friends on the Other Side

Chapter Notes

This is sort of an intermission chapter. I don't want to bombard everyone with non-stop historical narrative, so I will take some pauses between them. I also really wanted to show off how beautifully weird Louisiana is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As America concluded the first part of his story, he was suddenly bombarded with questions from all sides.

Well, America thought, I suppose it's better than another awkward silence.

The incessant noise was not exactly what he'd hoped for. Then again, rational discussion was never really the nations' forte, especially when America dropped such a huge metaphorical bomb on them. A few nations had even started altercations over the story. Ireland was repeatedly whacking England over the head and calling him a plethora of rude words (although, she often did that for most any reason). France and Spain were somehow simultaneously screaming at each other and crying, while Romano yelled at both of them.

America, meanwhile, simply stood in the same place he'd been throughout his storytelling. Beside the fireplace, under the silver gaze of the woman in the painting. It was a mesmerizing portrait, one of Louise during the 1840s – at which point she'd taken the name 'South.' Her long, black locks were pulled up elegantly, framing her delicate features which were crossed with a smug, haughty grin. Her hands were gently poised beneath the voluminous, lacy sleeves of her white cotton and silk gown. Around her neck was her little, gold Fleur-de-lis pendant.

"Everyone, SHUT UP!" Germany bellowed, once again having to serve as the voice of order. "I am sure we all have questions for America, but that is no excuse for causing all this fuss. Perhaps we should let America continue directing this discussion? It is about his life, after all."

"Thanks, Germany," America said with a grateful smile as everyone quieted. "I don't know if I'm up to continuing the story tonight, but I think I can handle a few questions."

France was the first one to act.

"How did this happen?" France said, his tone almost desperate. "How did I never know I had another colony?"

"Well, how often did you even visit Canada?" America asked.

"I raised little Canada, myself, until England came along, snatched him away, and decided dumping a child in the middle of nowhere was a good idea. And, besides, I thought little Canada represented all of my New France."

"I wasn't, though," said Canada softly, causing a few nations to jump as they had forgotten he was there. "Any lands beneath the current border between me and America…well, I never felt any real connection to them, eh. Even as part of New France, the groups of people were very different."
"Heh, at least until England drove out the Acadians," America added.

"I beg your pardon?" said England. "The who?"

"The Acadians, eh," Canada said, his brows furrowing slightly. "They were French colonists in my lands, but different from the people of Quebec. You threw most of them out and confiscated their property in *Le Grand Dérangement* because you thought they were dangerous."

That had been one of the few points of contention Canada had had with England, not that England had even listened to Canada's opinions at the time (or, really, ever). Canada was only a child when *Le Grand Dérangement* (or, the Great Expulsion) took place and he remembered crying himself to sleep over all the suffering those people went through simply for being "the wrong sort," in England's words. A third of the Acadians died in that forced removal.

"I am not surprised *Angleterre* would do something so monstrously brutish," said France. "But what does that have to do with my poor, neglected *Louisiane*?"

"Many of them ended up as her citizens," America added. "They were responsible for forming Cajun culture. They made Louisiana…well, *French* again, after being under Spain's control for so long."

"But, that doesn't answer the question, *amigo*," said Spain. "How did neither of us ever know we had another colony?"

"I already answered," said America. "I asked France how often he even visited Canada." He turned to France. "I actually meant: how often did you visit his *lands*? Yeah, you found him after looking around for five minutes, but, after that, you just left the place alone. As you said, you assumed Canada was all of New France, so you never stopped to check for Louisiana. Have you ever even been to New Orleans before now?"

"Of course I have been here before!" France protested, suddenly becoming a bit fidgety. "I just…I did not come back very often after the first time. The humidity is murder on my hair and…" France trailed off as he noticed the expression on America's face.

"And you actually wonder how you never found her." He turned back to Spain. "What's your excuse?"

"I had an empire to run," Spain said defensively. "I couldn't check in on every new territory I acquired."

"You raised Mexico and a vast majority of South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, and you even tried to steal *me* from England a few times, too, but you couldn't spare time to check for one more colony?"

"I thought that if there was a colony then France would've handed her over after we signed that treaty. How was I supposed to know he'd missed her?"

France muttered something that had Spain turn a glare on him.

"What was that, *amigo*?" he said.

"I said," France replied, puffing up in indignation, "Perhaps you would've noticed her if you ever actually paid attention to your territories like I did to mine."

"Is that why Haiti still threatens to kill you if you ever come near her, again?" Spain quipped. "Because you were 'so kind and attentive' she repaid you by slaughtering every Frenchman she
could find during her rebellion."

The other nations winced. That was a very low blow and Spain was well-aware how sensitive France was when it came to the subject of Haiti and her revolution. Spain seemed to realize that he'd crossed a line when he saw his friend's expression crumble.

"Francis, mi amigo," Spain said. "Lo siento, I did not mean…I was just…"

"Harsh," Prussia said, crossing his arms and shaking his head disapprovingly. "Real harsh, Antonio."

"Look, dudes," America spoke up. "Let's not make this situation worse. The fact was that neither of you knew about her. There's no need to bring up things like the Haitian Revolution."

America chose to leave it unsaid that Haiti's revolution had had a dramatic effect on the Louisiana Territory. When the slaves of Saint-Domingue revolted and began slaughtering every white person they could get their hands on, a number of the former plantation owners, slaves, and non-white free peoples escaped to Louisiana, and they, like the Acadians, caused a major cultural shift. Especially when it came to certain religious aspects of the culture.

"Alfie-boy's right," said Ireland. "Ya both acted like a pair of tossers, in the old days. Every European nation did…'cept me, I never did anythin' wrong. I didn't have enough money to get away wit' bad behavior."

"If we could please keep this conversation on track," Germany said sternly. "This is not a world conference. America invited us into his home to discuss something very important to him. The least you all could do is be respectful and polite and not bring up irrelevant arguments every few minutes."

"All right, I've got a question," Denmark said calmly. "America, we're friends, right?"

"Yeah, dude," said America.

"You could even call us 'bros,' right?"

"Right."

"So why did you not ask me and Prussia to help throw an awesome bachelor party for you before you got married?!"

A few of the other nations groaned at that. Ireland even pressed her face into her hands and muttered, "Oh, for t'e love o' Christ." If there was ever a nation gifted with a supernatural power to instantly deflate tension and seriousness in a room, it was Denmark.

"Well, bachelor parties weren't really a big thing, yet, and I needed to get to know Louise and -"

"That's no excuse, bro!" Denmark protested. "I don't care if she was your soulmate! Bros always come first, and I am feeling slighted. And I'm sure Prussia agrees, right, Prussia?"

"Ja, you denied us the chance to properly celebrate our awesome sworn brother's nuptials with booze and music and snacks…and-and booze! The Awesome Code of the Awesome Trio demands satisfaction."

Of all the turns the discussion could've taken, America had certainly not expected this. Well, considering he'd thought to invite Prussia and Denmark, he probably should have. They weren't the sort for sappy love stories (not in public, at least…America knew Denmark and Prussia were secretly suckers for Disney movies); their main interest was in driving away personal problems by having fun
and drinking a lot.

"Dane and I are going to claim compensation for the wasted opportunity," said Prussia with a solemn look on his face. "Sometime soon, when you least expect it, America, we will get our due."

America just blinked obliviously back at his friends. In truth, he suspected Prussia and Denmark were already plotting to kidnap him and force him to go on a buddy-trip to make up for the much-belated bachelor party. He knew showing them the Hangover movies was a bad idea.

Before America or anyone else could continue the discussion, there was loud crashing sound outside. A female voice screamed, "Es el diablo!" The nations all shot out of their seats and rushed to the front windows to see what was going on just in time for Louisiana and Veracruz to charge in through the door, before slamming it shut and bolting it behind them. The two girls, breathing heavily as if they'd just run a marathon, leaned back against the door in relief.

"Ay, that was close," said Veracruz.

"Are you girls all right?" America asked worriedly. "What happened?"

"We was walkin' home and passed by de old convent," said Louisiana. She then shot a glare at her friend. "I told Verónica to stay quiet, but she just had to choose dat moment to sing."

"I cannot help it," Veracruz said, crossing her arms and tilting her chin in a resolute pose. "I was born to sing and it just comes out, sometimes. Besides, I thought your stories were just stories. Like all the times Oaxaca claimed she saw the chupacabra when she and Michoacán did survival training in the jungle."

"Well, dey ain't just stories, cer.

"I know that now!"

"Girls, please," America spoke up. "Ana, I think I know where this is going. Is it the Comte?"

"Yeah, Papa, it's him," said Louisiana.

"Oh, great," America muttered in annoyance. "Ana, go get the kit."

"Yes, Papa."

"Veracruz, please go make sure the other doors are locked."

"Sí señor."

As the two girls hurried off, America stood by one of the windows flanking the door and drew back the curtain slightly to peer out.

"Yep, he's still out there," America said. "The douchebag."

"America-san," said Japan. "What, exactly, is happening?"

"Yes," England added. "What the devil had those girls so terrified?"

"Hm?" America turned back to the other nations. "Oh, just the vampires."

"What?!" nearly everyone shouted.
"Yeah, they were surprise to me, too. When I signed the Louisiana Purchase, it never said anything about vampires. Louise told me they came with the *Casquette Girls.*"

"The Casket Girls?" England repeated.

"Well, that was their nickname. They were the women France shipped out here to give, um, 'companionship' to the male colonists."

France looked sheepish at that. Most of the people who went to France's colonies were men. And they had, naturally, gotten a bit…lonely. So, France tried to enlist some women to go to the colonies and help start families over there. Of course, most of the respectable girls in his country wouldn't have anything to do with places like Louisiana and the sort of men that were living there. In the end, France had kind of had to scrape the bottom of the barrel and mostly ended up sending prostitutes. He'd had no end of complaints sent to him from the colonists and it was probably why interracial marriages became so common. It wasn't as though France was the only one who did it and at least France was decent enough to treat the women with respect…England had done the same thing when trying to get Jamestown's population to go up, and the girls he sent were basically abducted off the streets.

"When the girls showed up," America continued. "They had these weird, coffin-shaped boxes with them to hold their possessions, which got them their nickname. Louise said she always suspected at least one of the girls had brought something other than clothes in her box."

"Here you are, Papa," Louisiana said as she returned and handed America a polished wooden box. America opened it up and withdrew a crucifix necklace, a bottle of holy water, and a pistol which he loaded with odd-looking bullets.

"Everyone stay here," America said. "The Comte and I need to have a little chat."

America then marched outside, the crucifix around his neck, the bottle of holy water tucked into his pocket, and the gun in his hand.

"Jacques St. Germain," he called out. "You asshole, what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The other nations stared out the windows at the showdown. The man – or, rather, vampire – which America was faced off against was a tall, handsome individual with an arrogant grin. The creature wore the traditional attire of an eighteenth-century French aristocrat. He seemed completely composed as America began shouting at him.

"Sacré bleu," France gasped. "I know that man. That is the Comte de St. Germain. I thought he was dead."

"Apparently not, Frenchie," England responded. "Ve~ France, how do you know the scary vampire?" Italy said timidly, cowering behind Germany as he often did in situations such as these.

"He was a favorite at court," France explained. "He was rumored to be an alchemist and claimed to be several hundred years old."

"And at no point did you find that suspicious?" Romano said incredulously before muttering "Stupid bastard" under his breath.

"I've told you a thousand times," America exclaimed loudly from outside. "Stop harassing my
"I am thinking America may need some assistance," Russia spoke up. "He is not doing so well with the negotiating."

"I don't recommend goin' out dere," said Louisiana. "De Comte might not look it, but he is one nasty piece of work. And I bet he's brought his posse wit' him."

"Not to be worrying. I can help."

"You? What do you know 'bout fightin' de undead?"

Russia just smiled and pulled his trusty lead pipe out of his jacket.

"I don't know much about the undead," said Russia. "But most things respond to pain."

"I could've handled it on my own," America complained as everyone returned to the dining room.

Russia just chuckled while everyone sat around looking nervous. With the exception of Louisiana and Veracruz, who looked impressed by the thorough beat-down Russia had delivered to the vampire leader of New Orleans. Louisiana would honestly admit that she never thought a vampire, especially one as old and powerful as the Comte, could be reduced to pitiful sobbing like that.

"I thought it was right neat how Mr. Russia handled de situation, Papa," said Louisiana.

"I nearly got in a kill-shot," America said defensively.

"You let yourself get distracted, though, Amerika," Russia said cheerily. "If you did not waste time with the talking, you would've easily taken him down. It is all right, though. I greatly enjoyed smashing the arrogant Frenchman's face in."

Russia then turned his creepy smile towards France, who had been very disconcerted by the eagerness with which Russia had brutally assaulted one of France's former nobles…even if said noble had become an unholy abomination that haunted the darkness.

"Maybe it's best if we all turn in for the night?" Lithuania suggested timidly. He was doubtful he'd sleep easily after what he and the others had just witnessed, but it was better than remaining in the same room as the source of his anxiety.

"Good idea," America said. "We can continue our discussion tomorrow. For now, I think we all need some sleep."

There were murmurs of agreement and America stood up to escort the nations to their rooms. Louisiana insisted on carrying an old candelabra and turning out the electric lights…for a girl who had been menaced by a vampire not even twenty minutes earlier, she seemed bizarrely fond of maintaining a spooky atmosphere.

The rooms on the upper floors were no less grand and luxurious than the living areas on the first floor. Louisiana had, earlier, proudly boasted of her mother's decisions when it came to decorating…and the nations all finally took notice of how much like her mother – as seen in the portrait – Louisiana looked. Indeed, Louisiana looked as much like her mother as Massachusetts resembled
America.

Despite the elegance of the house, there was a strong sense of age and decay about the place, as if it were something out of time. While the nineteenth century was not all that old in the grand scheme of things, especially when compared with nations who had seen the downfall of Rome, the entire structure just seemed to radiate an aura of oldness in its dark, heavy design. For all that it was once a prime example of decadence, it bore the marks of its time in the faded, yellowing, floral wallpaper and the moth-eaten draperies and the cobwebs hanging from the oil lamps that lined the hallway.

The bedrooms were much the same. While Louisiana had clearly added some modern updates in regards to plumbing and electricity, the heavy presence which permeated throughout the house was still clear in the ornate, Victorian furnishings which made up the bedrooms. While there was not a sense of danger or an unspoken warning that everyone should leave, the place was somewhat eerie and filled with an air of...something.

Simply put, it no longer surprised the nations that Louisiana had vampires considering how she lived.

When it came to personifications, their homes were often reflections of their culture. Not necessarily how the ordinary citizen lived, but definitely tied to the personality and traits associated with the country. Russia, for instance, owned a large house which might even be considered a palace by some; however, it was largely unlived-in and some parts had fallen into disrepair since the Soviet Union separated (obviously the average Russian did not live in a palace, dilapidated or not, but the sheer number of countries which had once been under Russia's control demanded more space to be available...until all those nations left, that is). It not only demonstrated how much Russia, the person, had lost but how much Russia, the country, had lost. Only in more recent years had Russia been able to make needed renovations to his home, but it still remained largely empty.

The nations had realized something similar occurred with America's states. America had a home in every state specifically for every state. And the states' homes revealed something about their personalities, cultures, and the beliefs attributed to them. In Louisiana's case, it was clear her home reflected old values and traditions (as she said her mother designed the house and she wouldn't change anything, despite claiming to have more modern tastes) combined with former extravagance reduced to a state of decline – in other words, a past filled with money and power which had since been lost. The general feeling of spookiness in the place seemed to be more a mark of regrets than of evil.

"Well, goodnight, everyone," America said to the last few nations he and Louisiana showed to their rooms. "See ya'll in the morning."

"And 'member," Louisiana added. "If ya need somet'in', give us a holler."

For some reason, the words did not comfort the group as they locked the doors behind them.

There is a very easy way to describe Louisiana.

Forty percent Catholic, sixty percent Baptist, one hundred percent Voodoo.

The figures for Catholic and Baptist might alternate a little, depending on the times and population (to say nothing of smaller denominations and non-Christian groups), but the third remains constant. For all that the white, European settlers had thought they had "tamed" and "civilized" the so-called savages around them, the traditions and beliefs of the indigenous peoples and the slaves brought from
Africa had mingled with those of the Europeans in a manner only outdone by the mixing of blood between the different groups – despite many people's protestations to the contrary. Louisiana had always been one of the most mixed-race of all the states, largely thanks to France's and Spain's open-minded attitudes about interracial unions, and it had imbued in her a strong sense of loyalty to the various ethnic groups which comprised her and the identity they formed for her.

Despite it not being one of her official titles or nicknames, she was the Voodoo state. Absolutely and without question and with all the baggage and stereotypes that title entailed.

"Are you sure we should do this when there are so many people here, Ana?" said Veracruz, watching as her friend tied a white cloth around her hair.

"Havin' second-t'oughts?" said Lousiana, pulling the fabric tight. She wore a plain, white dress and no shoes. Around her neck was a gold Fleur-de-lis pendant – her mother's.

"No, not at all. I think it's muy interesante. But, what if one of the pendejos wakes up and finds us?"

"Den dey'll run out screamin' 'cause dey don't understands it. Much as I like dem…well, most of dem…" She frowned, thinking of England. "Dey ain't all dat good when it comes to t'ings dat are unfamiliar to dem. 'Specially t'ings wit' such a bad reputation."

Veracruz nodded. Ignorance was a powerful element in creating fear, especially when a person tries to compensate for that ignorance by devising their own conclusions without stopping to ask questions and gather information. Veracruz had witnessed such things firsthand and was not about to start throwing the proverbial stones at her – besides, Veracruz had seen stranger things from the Cubans who practiced Santería.

Still, it did feel a little odd being invited into what could, from a Western standpoint, be considered a "temple." Especially one which was dedicated to such esoteric and unspoken-of deities as the loa of the Voodoo religion.

The room was located in the basement of the house and painted black, decorated with red and purple draperies and long strands of multicolored Christmas lights. On one wall was a large portrait of Marie Laveau, the great Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, with a small altar beneath it containing candles and small tokens. On another wall was a portrait of the Sauk war chief Black Hawk, also with an altar below containing ritual offerings. There were other altars in the room, each dedicated to specific loa (primarily to the Guédé, the Petro, and, of course, to Li Grand Zombi, the Creator) and decked in their preferred offerings…usually rum and tobacco. Shelves were stocked with numerous objects associated with the more 'magical' effects, such as the gris-gris bags, potions, amulets, skulls, dried plants, and art that were so iconic to Louisiana Voodoo – though no dolls with pins sticking out of them were present anywhere, as they were not actually prominent in the religion (though Louisiana did sell them to gullible tourists).

All in all, it was just a weird place…much like Louisiana.

America shifted uncomfortably in his sleep.

It had taken some time to finally drift out of consciousness, as his thoughts were consumed by the fears he had of progressing further with his story. Once he had succumbed to the need for rest, his dreams were haunted by the things his subconscious would never let him acknowledge in his waking hours.
It was Summer. A cool breeze was wafting down the mountainside. From where he lay, America could see the sweeping vales and lofty hills of the Shenandoah Valley below. It was so peaceful and calm.

As he sat up, he noticed he was only dressed in plain, light trousers and a loose, cotton shirt. No shoes, no cravat, not even a day jacket. If anyone happened upon him in this state, it would be considered quite indecent. They may just mistake him for a local farm boy, though, which America didn't actually mind...after all, he'd never really cared about impressing people, except in things that really mattered.

America realized that he wasn't alone, however. He turned and saw a figure nestled in the grass beside him. The pale yellow gown contrasted sharply with her smooth, brown skin and silky, black hair. He knew her, though...how silly of him to be startled to find his wife beside him! This was perfectly normal, he had no reason to be concerned.

He settled himself back down in the grass and watched as her silver eyes fluttered open. South smiled at him and he smiled back. She sat up and leaned over to kiss him. America closed his eyes. When she broke the kiss, America reopened his eyes...and froze.

South's eyes. Something was wrong with her eyes.

The normally bright silver was gone. Instead, there was only cold, stormy grey glaring down at him though she continued to smile – and that, too, was a twisted mockery. Behind her, the sun was nowhere to be seen as storm clouds gathered and the gentle Summer breeze was replaced by a biting, howling wind.

"South?" America said quietly.

Suddenly, her hands descended and wrapped around his throat in an iron grip. Nails like talons dug into his flesh, choking the air from his lungs and making every desperate gasp burn.

"You had no right," South screeched at him. "No right! How dare you?!"

His vision blurred as water clouded up his eyes...he couldn't see, he couldn't breathe, all sound was drowned out by the roar of the wind...all he could do was frantically try to pull at the hands squeezing tighter and tighter.

America shot up in bed, eagerly taking in breath after breath of air.

It took him a moment to remember where he was. It was the New Orleans house. He was in his bedroom...his and South's bedroom, a callous part of his brain reminded him. He got to his feet and headed to his bathroom to splash some cold water on his face. That dream had been horrible, and all too real.

When America had nightmares, though, they always felt far too real.

It wasn't the first time he'd had such a vivid nightmare, nor even the first he'd had about South. The worst part was that America knew he would have many more like it in the days to come. He expected it since the moment he decided to tell others about South. He had learned early on that his wife despised the Europeans, despite constantly attempting to emulate them. Her screams at him in that nightmare would have been exactly what she would have said had she known America had dared to speak of her and their marriage to any of the other nations.

She had been very private when it came to their family. The only other nation she considered a
respected ally was Russia, and then only from a distance. She even voiced a strong dislike for
Canada on several occasions. How many times had America entrusted her with letters to countries
like England and France, only to never receive a reply from them? America could understand letters
not making it across the Atlantic once, even two or three times, but every single time?

It had taken a lot of study and self-reflection for America to realize South had been a controlling
person. Unhealthily so, at points. She constantly wanted America's attention solely on her and the
children, and would always become agitated or critical when America mentioned strengthening ties
to other nations.

England was her enemy from the moment she existed; as far as South was concerned, he and all his
people should sink into the ocean. France and Spain were the negligent fathers who left her all alone,
abandoned to the cruelty of the world; she would've ripped both their throats out given half a chance.
Japan, Denmark, Lithuania, the Italies, Germany, and Prussia would all have been considered too
"foreign" for South to find acceptable. Ireland would have been tolerated by South, to some extent,
though South would have still looked down her nose at her.

If she knew that America was revealing such intimate aspects of their life to those nations…

America gave a shudder. She may be dead, but South still terrified him. There were times he thought
he felt her presence, hovering always over his shoulder and whispering things in his ear. He had
valued her words, once; he trusted her as his wife, his only real confidante and friend, but she had
connived and conspired behind his back and eventually ripped their family in two.

Sometimes…sometimes, America wondered if South had ever even loved him, at all, or if he'd
merely been the means to an end in a plan he never understood.

"Well, now, I t'ink I might have messed somet'in' up," Louisiana said as the smoke cleared.

"You think?" Veracruz said testily, brushing soot off her clothes. "Ay, and I really liked this outfit,
too," she muttered to herself.

"Hey, don't look at me like dat," said Louisiana. "You knew de risks, no buyer's remorse."

"But this wasn't even about me. This was about trying to break the hold your dead mother has on
your papa."

"Oui, but you agreed to help me. I just don't understand what went wrong. I sang all de words right.
My only guess would be dat Maman's spirit really don't wanna let Papa go."

And, Louisiana left unsaid, her mother had been far more expert in the craft than Louisiana, herself,
ever was. Everything Louisiana knew, she'd learned from her mother and the Voodoo Queens and
Kings. Considering her mother had been trained by bokors, those who "served the loa with both
hands," while Louisiana preferred to follow the more benign path in Voodoo, it wasn't surprising that
Louisiana would face serious challenges in trying to send her mother's restless spirit onward through
the gateway to the other side.

At least things couldn't get wor-

"MA!" a shrill voice called down the basement stairs.

"Merde," Louisiana said to herself. "What is it, Washitaw?! Mama's very busy!" she called back.
Washitaw Nation was Louisiana's very embarrassing micronation. In contrast to Nevada, who absolutely doted on her little Molossia, Louisiana often found it very difficult to be affectionate towards her own daughter. Probably because Washitaw was so arrogant and demanding – the girl kept trying to get federal recognition as a Native American tribe, despite the fact that she was completely made up, and constantly appropriated cultural symbols from legitimate tribes (which annoyed the hell out of Louisiana's aunts and uncles). Louisiana hadn't even really wanted to be a mother, in the first place; besides, she thought it was blatantly unfair that she had had an unplanned pregnancy when it was Mississippi who led the nation in teens getting knocked up, despite her pushing abstinence-only sex-ed in schools – it was the reason why Louisiana, Arkansas, and Alabama all thanked God for their sister, otherwise one of them might just be number one on that list.

"I need money, Ma!" Washitaw yelled back.

"Den do your chores for once!" Louisiana retorted sharply. "I ain't floatin' you no mo' money 'til you pull your weight 'round here!"

"Bitch! I hate you! If you won't spot me, I'll just ask Aunt Texas!"

Louisiana rolled her eyes. Washitaw always pulled out the 'Texas' card whenever she didn't get her own way, despite the fact that Texas always forgot that Washitaw even existed.

"This is why I'm never having children," said Veracruz, shaking her head in pity.

The nations in the house awoke to the scent of cinnamon wafting through the air.

While most were not fully awake, and some, such as Romano, grumbled about being up at "such an unreasonable hour," their moods lifted when they saw the breakfast buffet which Louisiana was cheerfully setting out for them. Technically it was the first day of Lent, which once meant no practicing Christian would dare touch rich foods, but this was Louisiana's house and she would never withhold her famous beignets and chicory coffee.

"Good mornin', ya'all," Louisiana drawled, not looking the least bit tired despite having had quite a lot of alcohol the previous night, to say nothing of staying up until the small hours conducting a Voodoo ceremony. "I hope everyone slept well."

In contrast to Louisiana's easygoing morning personality, Veracruz was drinking coffee as if her life depended on it.

Another seat at the table was occupied by a scowling preteen girl. She had dark skin, violet eyes, and wore her black hair in thick braids which she'd tucked under a gaudy, feathered headdress that was covered in sequins and glitter. She glared at the nations for a moment before turning away with a huff.

"Hey, dudes," America said as he descended the stairs and followed the other nations to the dining room. "Oh, morning, Washitaw," he added, waving at the preteen girl.

The girl flipped her middle finger at him, which prompted Louisiana to whack her hand with a wooden spoon.

"Damn, bitch," the girl snapped.

"Letitia Jones," Louisiana said sternly. "You apologize to your granddaddy."
"Blow me."

"Keep givin' dat attitude and, I can promise you, ain't nobody gonna recognize you as a nation."

The girl simply stood up and stormed off. Louisiana gave everyone an apologetic look.

"Sorry 'bout dat," she said. "Wasitaw has always been a bit difficult. Even as micronations go."

Everyone decided it was best not to comment on the matter of Louisiana's rude micronation, though France and Spain looked fairly mortified. They all chose, instead, to simply sit down and enjoy the food.

They were interrupted a short moment later by a knock at the door.

"Now, who could dat be?" Louisiana wondered aloud as she went to answer it.

There was a brief sound of the door being unlocked and opened, which was suddenly punctuated by a surprised shriek and the door being slammed shut. Worried about what it might be, considering the appearance of vampires the previous evening, the nations all rushed out to find Louisiana trying to physically bar the door from opening as the person outside rapped on it loudly and impatiently.

"What is it, Ana?" said America. "Is it the Comte, again?"

"Worse!"

"Is it zombies?"

"Worse!"

"Is it the revenue men?"

"WORSE!"

"Okay, now I'm worried."

America nudged a reluctant Louisiana out of the way and cautiously opened the door. His tense posture relaxed in an instant, however, and he turned to give Louisiana an unamused look before opening the door.

Standing in the doorway was a familiar figure and the nations all wondered what on earth had Louisiana so upset as they recognized the state.

"Oh, hello, again, Virginia," England said evenly. He was hoping to gain some better footing with his old colony; at least to the point that she wouldn't point a firearm at his head like the first time they'd met.

It didn't seem to work as the teenager narrowed her eyes sharply.

"What did ya just call me?" she growled. Advancing through the doorway, she grabbed England by the front of his shirt. "What did ya just call me?!!"

England realized he'd made a huge mistake. While the girl looked enough like Virginia to be her twin, closer inspection showed some stark differences. Instead of the pewter grey eyes Virginia had, this girl's gaze was a midnight blue. Where Virginia was of a light build and dressed herself in prim and proper clothes, this girl was more muscular and wore somewhat masculine work clothes. The girl even wore her hair a bit differently; Virginia kept her brown locks tied back with a blue bow, but
this new girl kept hers pulled into a short tail which was tied with a plain piece of cord (she had a
loose hair strand like Virginia's, too, but it was on the opposite side of her face).

"West, I'm sure England didn't mean anything," America said calmly.

"Do you know how much I hate bein' compared to that…to that…that condescendin' snob?!)" the girl
retorted. "It's bad enough havin' to share a name with her, but lookin' like her, too? That's just injury
to insult."

"Come on, West Virginia, it's nothing that could be helped."

"Maybe not my looks, but you coulda done more to give me the name I shoulda had."

As she released her hold on England, the nation noticed something on her hands. On either hand was
a word, tattooed in plain, black ink. On her left hand was the word 'Vandalia' and on her right was
'Kanawha.'

"Come on, Lenna, it wasn't like I was the one who changed your name at the last minute," America
said.

Louisiana muttered something which had West Virginia rounding on her, eyes blazing.

"What was that?" she demanded.

"I said, could I offer you some coffee, cher?" Lousiana said, a toothy, forced smile spreading across
her face. "Maybe some breakfast?"

"I will not ever eat at a traitor's table."

Louisiana's left eye twitched slightly. While she might adore Virginia, her relationship with West
Virginia was hardly what one could even remotely consider amicable. West Virginia had always
made it plainly clear that she hated the "treasonous, traitorous southern states" and especially the
sister with whom she shared a name. At least Louisiana wasn't as despised by West Virginia as
Virginia, herself, was…Louisiana doubted she could keep her sanity if she woke up every other
week to someone attempting to smother her with a pillow.

"All righty, den why are you here?" Louisiana replied.

"Business," said West Virginia gruffly. "I needs to borrow yer roof."

"Fucking shit," came a squeaky, high-pitched voice as a little grey figure entered the room.

"Oh, hi, dere, Mr. Tony," Louisiana said brightly. "Coffee? Beignets?"

The alien gave his odd, jerky nod as he carried a large crate of firearms into the house.

"So, why, exactly, do you need my roof?" Louisiana asked.

"A certain…person has left his roost at Point Pleasant," West Virginia explained. "Mr. Tony and I
has been trackin' him all the way out here."

"Oh, God-dammit, really?"

Faster than blinking, West Virginia slapped a small, yellow paper to her sister's forehead.

"No cussin' in my presence," she snapped. "We don't hold with none of that devil-talk, right, Mr.
"Shit fucking bitch," the little alien replied with another nod.

"Exactly!" West Virginia ignored the stupefied expressions of the nations and proceeded to withdraw an 1819 Hall Model flintlock rifle from the crate that Tony had brought in. "Well, if ya'll don't mind, Mr. Tony and I have somethin' that requires our attention. Don't nobody set foot on that roof or make any loud noises for the next twenty-four hours."

With that said, West Virginia and Tony the alien marched up the stairs.

After the awkwardness during breakfast, America insisted on them all getting on a bus and heading to another location before he would continue his story. It wasn't a very long journey to the new location, a place called "Chalmette," which was only six miles outside of New Orleans. The nations were a little confused about America's primary destination, an old battlefield and cemetery, but America revealed it as soon as he sat down on the steps of the large obelisk memorial.

"This is where the Battle of New Orleans was fought," he explained. "I wasn't there for it, but South was. It seemed…I dunno, fitting to be here for the next part of the story."

England and Canada both shifted a bit nervously as they realized what was coming. The War of 1812. It was a sore point between them and America, for more reasons than one.

"It all kicked off in June of 1812," America said tiredly. "I couldn't ignore the attacks against my people anymore, so I went to President Madison and asked him what we should do…"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Headcanon time! I think Prussia and Denmark love America's Disney movies. Prussia loves classics like Snow White and Cinderella because they came from Brother's Grimm while Denmark adores the Little Mermaid.

Yes, New Orleans has its own vampire lore. Sorry if that seems a little off-the-wall, but it's pretty much canon that supernatural stuff exists in the Hetalia universe (aliens, trolls, magic, fairies, flying mint bunnies…therefore, America getting into an argument with a vampire that's part of American lore isn't too out-there, in my opinion). Even if it's doubtful that vampires actually exist – and even more unlikely that the Casquette Girls brought them over to America.

Back when colonies in North America were still getting off the ground, some European powers would round up women and ship them to the colonies to basically become brood mares. The French tried to make it all look respectable by providing dowries and education and getting consent, even when they had to resort to recruiting prostitutes (the Casket girls were notable for being "respectable" as they were largely recruited out of Christian institutions like orphanages). The English, however, just raided brothels and snatched girls off the street and sold them to the male colonists (mostly in Virginia and other southern colonies which were largely settled by single men looking to make their fortune; colonists in the north usually went in family groups, so they didn't need help
Louisiana (specifically New Orleans) has long been associated with Voodoo. While African religions were already practiced among the slaves in Louisiana, the Haitian Revolution led to a strong revitalization of these beliefs and a more unified identity as followers of "Vodou." Louisiana Voodoo is, as a result, very similar to Haitian Vodou, both of which derive from West African Vodun and also led to the development of Hoodoo, a type of folk magic associated with blacks in the American South. I just wish to point out, here and now, that Voodoo is considered a religion, not magic (though "magical" aspects are included as part of the worship, especially in Louisiana).

A bokor is, for lack of a better word, a kind of witch-for-hire. They use the magical aspects of Voodoo, both good and bad, for personal gain rather than out of religious devotion. While not necessarily evil, they are generally perceived as untrustworthy (think Dr. Facilier from Disney's "Princess and the Frog" but not as blatantly villainous). Thought you'd seen the end of the micronations? Ha. Washitaw Nation is far too loud to go unacknowledged.

West Virginia was originally going to be named "Kanawha" (pronounced like "can-ah-wee"), but the name was changed at the last moment. Vandalia was also a proposed colony in what is now West Virginia, but it simply became part of Trans-Allegheny Virginia. The people in the region also tried, unsuccessfully, to separate from Virginia after the Revolution and become the state of Westsylvania.

The West Virginians had a very different culture from Virginia pretty much since the beginning. They were more isolated, rarely practiced slavery due to the mountainous landscape making large-scale farming difficult, and were usually comprised of the poorer social groups who were often looked down on and disenfranchised by the wealthy, land-owning gentry to the east. In truth, West Virginia was planning to break away for ages, the Civil War was just the excuse they used to justify it.

I chose West Virginia's human name, "Lenna," in honor of Lenna Lowe Yost, a West Virginia suffragette.
Chapter Notes

I honestly thought the last two chapters would've garnered more of a response.

*shrugs* Oh well.

Back to the historical narrative. This one's even longer than the last, I think. When did this become practically a novel? Also, I found I really do hate writing battle scenes. I'm not all that into the history of warfare, but I had to do my research to stay as accurate as possible.

Warning: Some war-related violence and a completely fictional Voodoo ceremony (I don't know how Voodoo ceremonies actually go, so I used some creative license...plus, does it even count if the person isn't doing it for religious reasons?). Nothing too graphic, I think, but not for the sensitive or weak-stomached as some instances border on the horrific (but they are historically accurate, as far as I can tell). Also, angst...lots of angst. Please remember, I have no intention of offending anyone, but I will include actual, historical events and aspects of cultures which some people might be a little uncomfortable with.

Also, from what I've read, there is a lot of fire in U.S. history.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*June 18th, 1812*

Alfred was pacing furiously around the president's office while Mr. Madison, himself, sat behind his desk and listened to his nation's worries.

"...We need to do something," Alfred said. "If my family or my people suffer any more harm...I won't be held responsible for what I might do."

It had taken all of Madison's calm, rational arguments to talk Alfred out of sneaking over to England and strangling the other nation, maybe even unleashing a bloodbath against the British aristocracy while he was at it. While Alfred was normally a kind, if naïve and overly-enthusiastic young man, the fact remained that he was also a husband and father...and had become even more protective after the birth of his and Louise's first child together, the state of Louisiana. Any further threats to them would be regarded as acts of war and an invitation to return fire with extreme prejudice.

Madison would never admit it, considering his devotion to his country and his fondness for Alfred as a person, but the personification of the United States terrified him, at times. There were moments when Alfred lost the gentlemanly attitude most Americans at least pretended to have towards warfare and talked about eliminating enemies in a way that removed them from the field in a very permanent and very unpleasant way. Madison was a fragile man, physically and in terms of personality, and he found some of Alfred's plans to be bordering on the insane, and likely the result of Alfred spending too much time around the war hawks.

Damn Calhoun and his war-mongering, Madison thought to himself.
"Alfred, before we do anything else," Madison said in his quiet voice, hoping the nation would hear him. "I want to be certain you understand the full implications of what openly declaring war against the British Empire will mean."

"I know damn well what it means, Mr. Madison," Alfred snapped, not sounding like the cheerful, polite, and idealistic lad Madison had once known. "I've fought England once before and won. I can do the same thing, once again, and I doubt it will even take half as long as the last time."

"You also had the support of England's enemies," Madison pointed out. "France is in no position to assist us again, and I doubt he would if it were possible for him, no matter his antipathy towards England."

"I don't need France's help. I only need my own people backing me, this time."

"Alfred, please, just stop and think things through. I am as outraged by what is happening as anyone, but we have to consider all the facts before we make a final decision. We have to be certain that war is what is best."

Alfred's gaze darkened and he turned towards his boss.

"Mr. Madison," he said in a deathly calm tone. "Since the moment I became independent, England had done nothing but attempt to undermine my status as a nation at every turn. He has seized our ships and our citizens, he has disrespected our neutrality, and he has even encouraged violence on our own shores. If ever there was reason to go to war, I doubt I can provide better evidence than that."

Madison sighed and picked up a quill and paper.

"Are you truly determined to go down this route, Alfred?" he said. Alfred nodded and Madison set the pen to paper. "If that is the wish of my nation, I will do what is necessary."

The words flowed swiftly from Madison's hand as he drafted a notice which would unquestionably lead to dramatic changes, good or ill, for the United States.

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**BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

**A PROCLAMATION**

Whereas the Congress of the United States, by virtue of the constituted authority vested in them, have declared by their act bearing date the 18th day of the present month that war exists between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the dependencies thereof and the United States of America and their Territories:

Now, therefore, I, James Madison, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim the same to all whom it may concern; and I do specially enjoin on all persons holding offices, civil or military, under the authority of the United States that they be vigilant and zealous in discharging the duties respectively incident thereto; and I do moreover exhort all the good people of the United States, as they love their country, as they value the precious heritage derived from the virtue and valor of their fathers, as they feel the wrongs which have forced on them the last resort of injured nations, and as they consult the best means under the blessing of Divine Providence of abridging its calamities, that they exert themselves in preserving order, in promoting concord, in maintaining the authority and efficacy of the laws, and in supporting and invigorating all the measures which may be
adopted by the constituted authorities for obtaining a speedy, a just, and an honorable peace.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed to these presents. Done at the city of Washington, the 19th day of June, 1812, and of the Independence of the United States the thirty-sixth.

Several days later…

Alfred was tired but filled with a sense of accomplishment as he walked through the front door of the home he had built in Wilmington, Delaware, where his family was currently residing.

While still filled with a patriotic fire, the likes of which he had not felt since his Revolution, he managed to smile and hug his children to him as they rushed to greet him. Most of his children, that is.

"How is Mary-Anne doing?" he asked of Virginia.

"Not so well, Father," Virginia said, biting her lower lip. "The unpleasantness in Baltimore has yet to diminish."

Alfred grimaced in worry. He suspected something was wrong as soon as he took his leave from D.C. following President Madison publishing the declaration of war. It seems the partisan politics in Maryland’s beloved city of Baltimore erupted into full-scale rioting, egged on by people like the inflammatory Alexander Contee Hanson, publisher of the Federal Republican newspaper, who was ruthlessly vilifying the Democratic-Republicans and calling for hostilities against the administration – it wouldn't surprise Alfred one bit if the man's vitriol would bring about his own destruction at the hands of the mob.

Whatever the case, the war had started and the first blood to be shed was on American soil; American blood, spilt by the hands of other Americans, far from any battlefield.

"How is your mother? And Little Lou?" Alfred said, trying to switch to a more pleasant topic.

'Little Lou' had become the pet-name for baby Louisiana. The southern states absolutely doted on the child, though quite a few of the northern states chose to keep their distance from her.

"They are both well," Georgia said brightly. "Mother is in the garden."

Virginia grabbed her father's arm and began forcefully leading him back out of the house, followed by the rest of the welcoming party.

The house Alfred had built for Delaware was a very simple, Federal-style brick residence with a modest garden in the back. The garden was a favorite spot in the Summer months due to the copious number of large, shady trees which provided welcome relief from the sun without the stuffiness of remaining indoors.

They found Louise where Virginia said. She was seated on one of the garden benches, reading aloud in French from a novel to the pretty, dark-haired baby nestled in the soft, white cotton lining of a wicker bassinet.

Alfred approached and pressed a kiss to Louise's cheek. She smiled but did not stop reciting until she finished the chapter she was on. Once she had concluded and marked her place in the book, she
turned to Alfred with an even look.

"So…it is certain, zen?" she said. "We are to 'ave war?"

"Yes," Alfred replied solemnly. He glanced to the states gathered around them. While they had grown a good deal so that they were no longer the tiny toddlers he'd struggled to build a home and a life for, they were still so young, too young to be embroiled in as serious a conflict as this war would likely be, in Alfred's opinion. "There was no other option. The time for talk is over. Now, we need to take action."

A few of the more anti-war states chafed at the statement. As far as they were concerned, the war should never have happened and it was the fault of men like Jefferson and Madison that their lives were about to be upended. Some had seen what happened with Maryland and considered the thought of anything further happening on American soil to be a horrific notion. The states who had gone to fight in the Barbary War were not particularly enthusiastic about witnessing violence, again, but were resigned to fight to protect their homes, their family, and their people, at all costs.

Late June, 1812

Alfred was relentlessly looking over the massive piles of paperwork he had to complete.

Customs duties were about to be drastically increased, which would only contribute to the growing ire of the merchants and businessmen who relied heavily on international trade. It was not something Alfred was proud of, but it was necessary to try and decrease the American people's reliance on foreign goods. Only a few decades earlier, honorable American women had led the way in the Revolution by boycotting British imports and making all necessities themselves or purchasing from fellow Americans. Alfred hoped his people would once more be able to put aside their desire for foreign luxuries for the sake of the common good.

Enlistment was another issue. Too few men were signing up with the United States military. Most were content with joining local militia units, but a large-scale military force was looking less and less likely if they couldn't shore up the numbers.

Funding was proving to be yet another concern as the banks weren't willing to lend support to the government to finance a major conflict. Alfred had had a few choice words with Madison about this as it wouldn't have happened had Madison not been so petty and short-sighted as to dissolve Hamilton's national bank, something which Madison was already planning to rectify (though, for now, it was too late).

Louise was there at Alfred's side, helping him work through the legalese and offering her insights into possible ways of resolving other issues. However, despite her keen knowledge of politics, Louise seemed more interested in developing the military strategy aspect of the war.

"We need a plan of attack," Louise said, glancing over the top of a report on tax revenue.

"That's why we have generals," Alfred said, staring intently at a list of something which might have been about imports or his own grocery list (he was a bit too tired to remember).

"Zat is not enough, ma moitié. We need to make a strike against our enemy. We need to make 'im bleed."

"We're not ready to launch an attack against England. The navy isn't nearly big enough to make that
kind of move and England has thousands of miles of distance, right now. The most we can do is have them seize British ships in our waters."

"…Per'aps zere is a target much closer which we may strike."

Alfred furrowed his brow in confusion before shock overtook him as he realized what she meant.

"No…never…” Alfred stammered. "I can't."

"Why not?" Louise said, her gaze narrowing. "We are at war with England. Canada is an English colony. 'e is our enemy by association."

"But, he…he's my brother. I already hurt him once, I can't do it again."

"No more zan 'e 'urt you, ma moitié. Where was your dear frère when you were fighting for your freedom? Where was Canada when you were lying injured in your tent, praying for ze strength to keep going no matter 'ow painful it was for you? What did Canada say when you asked 'im to join you and gain ze liberty you deserved?"

Alfred flinched as Louise's words became sharper and more impassioned.

"I will tell you where 'e was," she continued. "'e was sniveling behind England's coattails like ze coward 'e is. 'e does not deserve your compassion and 'e certainly does not deserve to be treated with respect for abandoning 'is own flesh and blood for ze sake of a man who barely ever remembers 'is existence."

The words stung at Alfred's heart. Much as he hated to admit it, Alfred had been carrying a great deal of resentment for his brother since the Revolution. Alfred had come to Canada's house, proudly proclaiming his quest for liberty, and had wanted his brother to be by his side in the war. Canada had actually seemed very tempted by the offer to join in the fight, to finally make his name in history and stand with his brother. But, in the end, he told Alfred 'no.' That one word had been utterly devastating for Alfred, who had long considered Canada the one person he could trust absolutely. To be rejected by someone he cared so much about had nearly broken him.

Instead, Alfred had turned his sorrow into rage and had lashed out, only driving his brother even further away. Alfred had, in his anger and presumption, attempted to force Canada into joining him and had ended up getting a beating he would never forget. Alfred was strong, superhumanly so, but so was Canada. Being so soundly defeated by his more soft-spoken twin had deeply injured Alfred's pride. While Alfred was certain he could win against his brother this time if he really tried, he had no desire to make such an effort.

"I will send one of our generals and a small unit to the Canadian border," Alfred said, pulling out a clean sheet of paper. "Their orders will be to make an offer to the Canadians for an alliance and to kill any British soldiers they encounter. And that is all they will do. I will not allow this to spiral into a larger conflict."

A heavy silence fell over the room as Louise glared at him.

August 18th, 1812

Alfred hated being so far from his family at a time such as this.
His attempt to broker an alliance with his brother had fallen to pieces thanks to the pompous grandstanding of General Hull. That same general was now in charge of the northwestern theater, and had sent word for Alfred's division to begin evacuation from their post at Fort Dearborn, citing that it was no longer safe. Things were going disastrously, so far. There had been a number of skirmishes and small battles, and Alfred's forces were getting routed at every corner...only a week or so ago they'd been beaten at the Battle of Brownstone, despite outnumbering the British forces eight-to-one. The only real victory the Americans had had, thusfar, was the valiant defense of Sacket's Harbor back in July. But only a few days ago, the Americans had engaged in a conflict at the village of Maguaga that had been utterly inconclusive. To say nothing of the loss of Fort Mackinac.

Hull was also worried about the security of Fort Detroit. Alfred feared it was only a matter of time before they had to surrender that, too.

Regardless, Alfred did as he was bidden and finished packing. He joined the rest of the group, a small garrison of little over sixty soldiers, some militiamen, and a few civilians (including nine women and eighteen children). Alfred smiled reassuringly over at his brother, the Miami tribe, who appeared to be increasingly on-edge. Miami was a well-dressed and handsome man who had taken to acting more and more like the Americans of European descent recently, unlike a number of the other tribes; though Alfred suspected he only did so to distance himself from the extremists, as one of his own former chiefs, a man named "Little Turtle," had tried and failed to lead an armed uprising against the United States government to reclaim their homeland (though the man later became a strong advocate for peace). Considering the current situation with the tribes, Miami clearly wished to put as much space between himself and the movement led by Tecumseh as possible.

"All right," Captain Nathan Heald announced. "The plan is simple and straightforward. We will be marching to Fort Wayne. We will not stop unless it is a state of emergency. Stay in formation and keep alert. The Potawatomi have made it very clear that they will not let us pass without a fight, so be prepared for trouble. Captain Wells and our escorts will be leading and you will follow their directions to the letter. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," the men replied.

"Good. Move out!"

Captain William Wells and the Miami warriors directed the party through the gate of Fort Dearborn. Wells was, as it happened, the son-in-law of Miami's former chief, Little Turtle; when Wells was a child, his father had been killed in action during the Revolution and Wells, himself, was soon after abducted by the Miami and raised as one of their own. Wells was also, at his core, a man devoted to his country, and had served faithfully as a mediator between the United States and the Native tribes.

Shortly after setting out from the fort, however, something felt wrong. Wells ordered the party to stop and he and Heald stepped aside and spoke hastily to each other in hushed tones. Alfred looked to his brother Miami, who glanced back with an expression of worry.


Alfred soon found himself bustled along with the rest of the troops while the militiamen and the Miami Indians were ordered to guard the women and children. Sending a brief glance towards Captain Wells, he noticed that the man had smeared some black substance on his face (from what Alfred could recall, it was a symbol to many tribes, including Potawatomi, of a warrior's bravery). The company hastily threw itself into formation and Heald gave the order to charge at a large dune. Alfred's blood was frantically pumping as the men surged upon the dune, charging over the top, and firing upon a group of Potawatomi warriors.
At first, everything appeared to be in hand, until Alfred glanced back and found, to his horror, that they had made a terrible mistake. A second group of Potawatomi had gone around and entered the gap between the cavalry and the wagons. The wagons were where the civilians were being guarded. In a matter of seconds, the Potawatomi forces had encircled both groups.

The screams of the women and children as the enemy force mowed down the militiamen compelled Alfred to abandon his place on the first line and try to cut through to help them. Alfred's eyes also sought out Miami and his warriors. Shock and anger coursed through him as he saw them being cut down by the larger force as they tried to enable the civilians to flee. As Alfred kept charging forward, desperate to do something, anything, to help, he saw the women trying to escape with the children – the Potawatomi warriors caught sight of them and ran them down, and Alfred's vision clouded with red.

He turned every which way and saw only slaughter. Captain Wells was lying motionless on the ground, a bloody gunshot wound indicating that he would never rise again. Captain Heald was badly injured but still alive. Miami was engaged in a brutal struggle with one warrior…a warrior much smaller and lighter than the others.

A glint reflected off a small pendant around the enemy warrior's neck and Alfred realized what it was. It was a turtle amulet, a symbol of the Anishinaabe. Recognition flared in Alfred's eyes and he knew…it was their sister, Potawatomi, herself.

As a knife pierced Miami's stomach and he tumbled to the ground, clutching at the wound as blood spilled over his fingers, Alfred gave a furious cry and raced towards Potawatomi, the bayonet of his musket primed to cause an equal injury.

But the woman was fast and dodged the attack, slamming her knife Alfred's back as he passed and knocking him down. The rush of adrenaline staved off the pain for a little while, but the blow had gone straight into his spine. Alfred heaved himself onto his side and flailed about in a frantic bid to return to his feet.

Potawatomi stood there, watching him with a curious tilt to her head as if she were contemplating a move on a chessboard. She squatted down in a crouch and watched Alfred's face, pushing a few strands of blonde hair to the side before coming to a conclusion.

"Little Star, where is your eagle charm?" she asked blandly as if they were politely discussing the weather.

"W-what?" Alfred choked out as the pain began to engulf him.

"The eagle charm. The one Mother carved for you. You were to always wear it around your neck as Silent Warrior was to wear his bear charm. Have you lost it, child?"

Her voice was sweet and gentle, a stark contrast to her violent actions and the curses Miami was spitting at her as he lay dying. Her eyes seemed distant, almost disconnected from the horrors around her, as if she was beyond understanding the severity of her actions. She spoke to Alfred as if he was still the little boy which she and the other Anishinaabe tribes had once treated with such love and care. He remembered the kindness she would always show, telling him stories and healing him when he was injured.

She paused for a moment and then withdrew a pistol.

"Do not worry, Little Star," she said. "I will help you find it. For now, though, I will make the pain go away."
She pointed the weapon at Alfred's head. There was a click. And everything went dark.

Sometime later…

When Alfred awoke, he had no sense of time or place.

All he could see was a dull, brown haze and a stifling scent of something burning. If he had to guess, Alfred would say someone was burning herbs. As his senses slowly returned, he realized his entire body was aching terribly, there was a sharp stabbing sensation in his chest, and his head was throbbing. He thought he heard something, like a soft voice chanting and someone shaking a rattle in short staccato beats, but it sounded as though it came from a considerable distance away.

He just wanted the pain to stop. He wanted to be at home with his wife and his children. Where was he? What was going on?

A faint sound caught his attention and Alfred gritted his teeth and forced himself to turn his head despite the pain. As his vision cleared, he began to discern shapes nearby. Focusing his gaze, he saw huddled figures. As the memories of the battle flooded back, it dawned on him what it was he saw.

It was the survivors.

They were in rough shape. Alfred's heart broke a little more when he saw that only six of the eighteen children had been spared in the attack. Captain Heald and his wife were both grievously injured, but had been patched up as best the Natives could've done with their limited medical supplies. Heald looked like a shell of a man, hanging his head in shame for what he clearly considered to be a consequence of his own failure as a commander; his wife, Rebekah, was weeping over the death of her uncle, Captain Wells, and what she had witnessed the Natives do to his body (according to the traditions of a number of tribes, including the Potawatomi, consuming the heart of one's fallen enemy would allow one to absorb their courage).

"Awake, Brother?" said the cruelly kind voice of Potawatomi. The strange chanting and rattling noise ceased as she moved over to where she could face him.

Alfred felt sick to his stomach as she leaned in to look closely at him.

"W-why?" Alfred asked. "Why di…did you…did you do this?"

She quirked a brow as if confused about why he would ask such a question.

"It is war," she said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Your people tried to cheat me, so I have allied with their enemies. It is as simple as that."

"Then why…why haven't you…h-handed us over to England?"

"Oh, I will hand the humans over to your enemy, soon enough. To be honest, though, I do not understand all this ransoming of captives. If you have an enemy, you should either kill them or force them to become one with you. Otherwise, the circle will continue and neither one shall ever be routed."

"And…and me? Are you going to…to hand me over to England, too?"

"Of course not!" Potawatomi reared back, an expression of disgust on her face. "That you should
even think I would ever willingly turn my land over to a stranger."

"You would give him m-my people, though?"

"Are we not your people, also? Have you disowned the Neshnabé? Are you not of our blood, despite your pale face?"

Alfred tried to turn away from her but she gripped his chin with one hand and forced him to look her in the eye.

"Are we to be forsaken by the land of our birth?" she pressed. "Is Mother's last son willing to cast away the ones who stood by his side for centuries before the white men took him from us? These… these strangers," She gestured towards the captives, who shrank back from her, "they are not truly yours. You may look like them, but you are not one of them… not really. They have been stealing you away from us, a little at a time, and will destroy who and what you are. They wish to force you and your true family to be copies of them, but they will never allow us to truly be their equals."

"And you've done nothing to make them wish to," Alfred snapped. "Twelve children are dead because of what you did, Nishiime."

Startled at Alfred's use of her human name, her expression softened and reverted to the strange, innocent expression from before. Something was very wrong with her. Alfred could only wonder what had happened to her to make his once good-hearted sister become so unstable.

"That is a deep regret," she said quietly. "Children are so precious, are they not?"

"Then, why did you do it?" said Alfred.

"I told you, Little Star. It is war." She rose to her feet and looked down at him. "You will be moved to a separate tent. I will not let my brother remain with these… people. And I will not chance it that my warriors accidentally ransom you over to your enemy."

As she turned to leave, something else occurred to Alfred.

"Nishiime, where is our brother?" he said. "What happened to Miami?"

"I have sent him back to his people," she answered, keeping her back to Alfred so he couldn't see her face. "I doubt he will be of much use to them, anytime soon."

"Nishiime… what did you do?"

"Enemies must be made an example of. He is a brave warrior; I have great respect for that. And I am sure he will… put himself back together soon."

A horrible realization came to Alfred. Potawatomi was bound by nature to follow with her people's culture. The culture which had compelled her warriors to consume Captain Wells's heart. Why should the rules change when it came to Potawatomi killing her own brother?

"Do not worry," Potawatomi said, taking his silence as acknowledgement or her actions. "He was not alive when I did it. Neither were you, for that matter."

Cold dread seeped through Alfred and his hand flew to his chest. There, still hot and stinging, was a scar on his left breast.
August 25th, 1812

Massachusetts sat at the desk in his quarters as his ship swayed and creaked.

He was examining reports of the most recent sightings of British ships, a cold smirk coming to his face as he remembered the recent capture of the HMS Guerriere. It was a good time to be American.

Although, Massachusetts thought with a hint of solemnity, the day that they had captured the ship had been the same day a terrible hurricane had struck New Orleans, leaving baby Louisiana horribly sick and damaging not only the British fleet but the American one, as well.

Still, Massachusetts was not prepared to let anything stand between him and defending the liberty of his home. Faint hints of memories that weren't his own often came to the young New England state, the valiant cries and proud cheers of brave Patriot souls who tossed monarchy to the dark ocean waves along with crates of tea.

Massachusetts's only regret was that New York was not with him on this gallant undertaking. While he and his brother often liked to go head-to-head and join in healthy bouts of argument, they shared a passionate love for the sea and the freedom it represented. That was why Massachusetts had personally felt it his duty to offer his services to the nation in the role of a privateer…though he wished he could call himself by the more romantic title of 'pirate.'

New England had long been a hotbed for all manner of illicit activities. For all that the New Englanders vaunted themselves as pillars of colonial Puritan virtue, the New England states had frequently become treacherous hives of scum and villainy. Their father told them that England, himself, had once been a pirate, and it appeared that some traits bred true. And Massachusetts and Rhode Island were now reaping the benefits of it, as they had familiarized themselves with the habits England employed in his own brand of naval warfare.

It would only be a matter of time before they found England, himself, and sent his ship to the bottom of the mighty Atlantic. Massachusetts's grin became somewhat predatory as he imagined returning home in triumph, dragging the once-proud England behind him in chains as a warning to any who dared threaten the freedom of the American people. And it would finally show that he, Massachusetts, was the true master of the waters and a force so strong he could take on the great British Empire and emerge the victor.

To be fully honest, Massachusetts well and truly despised England and hated that he and his neighbors had to be called the 'New England' states. They were nothing like England, not even Connecticut, whom their father said resembled England somewhat. As far as Massachusetts was concerned, England was a wicked, sinful nation who reveled in excessive luxury, alcohol, and lechery. The fiery words of the New England preachers often haunted Massachusetts's dreams, filling his mind with a self-righteous disdain for the foreign power.

Along with this came a fear of the power England held, not just as a nation but as a practitioner of Black Magic. Massachusetts might dismiss Rhode Island's assertion of his own use of magic as little more than foolish parlor tricks, but, deep down, he reviled witchcraft and those who practiced it. His father had told him England frequently used magic – though, usually, with minimal success – and the Puritan terror of the supernatural had reawakened in Massachusetts's heart that their avowed enemy had such power. It merely confirmed the growing prejudice he had for England, proving that England was both a voluptuary and a follower of Satan, as he'd feared.

"I will see that witch hang from the gallows for his evil," Massachusetts muttered to himself.
August 30th, 1812

Alfred was awakened from his sleep by the feeling of his hands being cut free of the ropes that bound them.

While Alfred was strong enough that something like rope would normally be incapable of restraining him, his sister was one of those tribes gifted with magical abilities. As the Keeper of the Fire, Potawatomi had access to knowledge hidden from the ordinary person and was able to craft a rope capable of holding a nation like America, someone blessed with superhuman strength.

That clearly did not prevent someone from cutting the rope with an ordinary blade, however.

Alfred darted to his feet and turned to see the face of his rescuer. It was one of Potawatomi's people, a powerful man if the emblems he wore were any indication of his office. Confusion must have shown on Alfred's face because the man held up his hands in a peaceful gesture.

"I mean you no harm," he said. "I have come to send you on your way."

"What do you mean?" Alfred replied. "Nishiime told me I was not to be ransomed."

"I know. My tribe has countermanded my instructions far too many times lately."

"Your...you know what she is?"

"As I know you are the land of my ancestors. I have never sought war with the white man's leaders, and I certainly do not want war with the land, himself."

"Who are you?"

"In the language of the English, I am known as 'Black Partridge.'"

"You're Potawatomi's chief? Captain Heald said you ordered your men not to attack us."

"I did. But you can see how much power a chief truly holds in this tribe. If the warriors wish to fight and the tribe agrees, there is little that can be done to stop them."

"Why did my sister do this? Why couldn't you stop her?"

Black Partridge let out a tired sigh.

"My tribe has been sick for some time, now," he said. "She fears she has lost her place in the world, that her hold on her land is slipping from her fingers as the white man keeps moving closer and closer. While I do not welcome this change with open arms, I do not believe that violence will prevent it. If anything, I feel it will only make our situation worse. The more we fight, the faster they arrive."

"And you would really help me?" said Alfred. "Even though it would be an act of betrayal to my sister, your tribe?"

Black Partridge stared Alfred in the eye and held up a shining, silver medal that hung from his neck. Engraved on the medal was the face of George Washington.

"I made a pact with your Chief Wayne at Greenville," he explained. "As long as I carry this around my neck, I shall never raise a tomahawk against a white man. I told Tecumseh as much when he
tried to recruit me."

Black Partridge then went over to the tent flap and peeked outside.

"We must hurry now," he said. "My brother just signaled that the rest of the tribe is distracted."

Alfred knew the time for talking was over and followed after the war chief. Black Partridge possessed that same generosity, kindness, and loyalty which Alfred had remembered Potawatomi showing to him in his childhood. Though his sister had lost her way, there still existed that spirit of what she had once been shining in the hearts and minds of her people.

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*September 3rd, 1812*

Alfred was quite a talented runner.

Being a nation, he was able to go a long time without food or sleep. Having superhuman strength only enabled him to add exceptional speed to this, making what should have been weeks of journey considerably shorter.

When Black Partridge had seen him off, he had kept running and running without looking back. Eventually, though, the strain did become a bit too much and he ended up near to collapse as he slowed his pace to a steady trek. He was somewhere in the Indiana territory, now. His original goal had been to try and reconnoiter with General Wayne, but, at this point, all Alfred wanted was to go home, to see his family and try to forget what happened. To leave the horrors of the western territories behind him.

Unfortunately, his encounters with the western battlefield was not yet at its end.

In desperate need of a reprieve, Alfred stumbled along a dirt path until he came to a weather-beaten sign indicating he was near a place called 'Pigeon Roost.' Hoping to meet with friendly faces, Alfred eagerly trudged along in the direction of the village with thoughts of safety and shelter in his mind.

Those hopes turned to ashes as he rounded the bend and came upon a sight as horrific as any he had seen, thusfar.

The smell of death radiated from the place as the charred remains of the settlement flaked in the breeze over about two-dozen lifeless bodies scattered about the area. Men, women, children all left to rot, their scalps sheared off – likely as trophies for whomever it was that had perpetrated this atrocity. Alfred froze and stared, tears rolling down his face, as he saw the figure of a pregnant women lying motionless in the dirt, the stab-wounds to her stomach crusted with dried blood. It took everything he had not to be sick.

Everywhere he looked, Alfred saw more and more evidence of what he already feared. Tecumseh and the Shawnee tribe were on the move, again.

Alfred couldn't help but feel that this was his fault. Maybe if he'd done more to keep his white citizens from moving into Indian lands, he could have prevented things like this and what happened at Dearborn. But, at the same time, he tried to tell himself that this *couldn't* be his fault, that this was all because of someone else. He kept repeating in his mind that these things were all the fault of Tecumseh, that the man was a vicious animal who needed to be stopped.

And yet, Alfred couldn't quite put down the small twinge of doubt in his head. The voice of his
conscience that told him that Tecumseh and his extremists were merely the result of a much larger problem. The problem of western expansion.

Alfred continued on, trying not to look back at the bodies of the civilians. He wasn't sure he could face the accusation that lingered around them, pointing the blame for this crime squarely at Alfred's own feet.

Mid-October, 1812

New York furiously threw the papers off his desk and began pacing his office.

He was in a newly-built log house in a less-developed section of the upper part of his state. With him was his stepmother, his baby sister Louisiana who never left the woman's sight, and the rest of the northern states (with the exception of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, who were still conducting attacks on British vessels, and Connecticut, who was off in Hartford writing anti-war propaganda like a coward). The southern states had been called off to attend to issues on their own fronts, what with a British blockade beginning to form against Georgia and South Carolina, as well as the rumors of something going on with the Native tribes in the south.

"Calm yourself, my sweet boy," Louise said as New York continued to fume.

"Calm?!" New York shouted. "I don't see how I can be calm, now! Van Rensselaer just led the men into a complete disaster! Those smug British were probably laughing as our forces turned tail and ran! We should've had them! Our forces were more than three times theirs! It should've been a total slaughter!"

"We may 'ave lost ze battle, but ze war still rages. And wars need competent generals. Zey may 'ave driven us back, but we took somet'ing valuable from zem."

New York paused to consider that. The Battle of Queenston Heights had been a major defeat, but they had, indeed, won a small consolation in the fact that they had brought about the death of Major General Isaac Brock, one of England's finest military minds. Without him, the British forces in Canada were not nearly as secure in their defense as they might be had he lived.

"Yeah, I guess that's something, at least," New York said. "Nice shooting, Monty."

Vermont smiled quietly in response. He had not relished killing, but he took whatever action he felt was necessary for the defense of his nation and family. Besides, with that gaudy uniform of his, it was almost as if Brock had been asking to be shot; the man hadn't even been fifty yards away, too, so it wasn't as if Vermont shooting him was some great miracle, no matter how much praise his own men had heaped on him for bringing down one of the big men amongst the enemy.

"We need a new strategy," Pennsylvania said. "And we need it fast, because there is no way we are taking on the Brits and the Canadians when Winter gets here."

"Don't know what else was can do," New Hampshire said in that slow, drawn-out manner of hers, shrugging slightly as she did so. New Hampshire had made it very clear that she wanted nothing to do with the war, so long as it didn't affect her lands and people. It was hardly surprising, as New England was dominated by anti-war Federalists. It had been a shock when the family discovered that Massachusetts and Rhode Island had up and formed their own privateering operation in defiance of their bosses' orders of non-involvement.
"I still think we have a chance if we hit them again," Pennsylvania continued. "Maybe at a more vital spot, like a port. Here, look at the map." She pointed towards the map that hung on the wall. "Yes, this is it. Kingston Harbor, that's where they are producing most of their ships."

"And how do you propose we capture it, Penny?" New Jersey said, frowning in skepticism. "It's likely going to be heavily defended. You make it sound like we just need to walk right in and take it."

Before Pennsylvania could give a sharp retort, there was a slow, steady pounding on the door. Everyone shared a worried glance. Louise handed Louisiana over to Pennsylvania and went to answer it, making sure to have a loaded pistol at-the-ready. She creaked the door open slightly, only to instantly fling it open as she saw who was there.

Standing in the doorway, disheveled, mud-soaked, sleep-deprived, and with a glassy, hollow stare, was Alfred.

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**December 20th, 1812**

It was not shaping up to be a particularly merry Christmas.

A dark gloom lingered over the house as Alfred became more and more withdrawn from his family. The states were certain their father hadn't said two words since he came back from the northwest territories. No one knew what was wrong with him or what he had seen. Louise had tried to approach him, but he did not seem to hear her; he would not even sleep in their bedroom, if he even slept at all…the family soon found he was keeping a vigil in front of the house at night. He couldn't even bear to look at baby Louisiana, each time he saw her he would start crying.

The family decided to spend Christmas at Pennsylvania's estate. It was a large and secure house, though simple in design, and surrounded by open fields. That seemed to put Alfred more at ease, as he became very nervous around woodlands. Everyone needed to get away from the war for a while, especially considering how their men had been forced to retreat from the field in Eastern Canada and no new advances were expected to take place until the Winter was over.

Pennsylvania watched her family go through the motions of setting up for Christmas as she sat at her piano, playing Christmas carols that felt void of any real mirth. Not everyone was even going to be there for Christmas, either, as Massachusetts and Rhode Island had yet to return and Connecticut refused to speak to the rest of them until the war was over.

"It ain't right," Kentucky said from behind her. "None of it."

"We will get by, Daniel," Pennsylvania said, focusing on the music sheet in front of her. "We always have, before."

"This is diff'erent, Penny. We don't know nothin' about how to fight this war. We ain't prepared for it. And, I don't know about you, but I don't think we can keep goin' with Pa actin' the way he is."

Alfred was sitting in an armchair by the window, watching the snow falling outside and covering the vast fields in a blanket of white. He had a musket at his side and he was tensed, as if awaiting someone or something to appear in the distance.

"I'm worried about him, sis," Kentucky added. "This ain't normal. Not for Pa, at least."
"Vater will be fine," Pennsylvania said, though she did not sound certain. "He always is. Things will get better, God-willing."

December 24th, 1812

Ordinarily, on Christmas Eve, the Jones family would attend a Midnight Mass service. Alfred, however, refused to let anyone leave the house. When the states had asked when he wanted them ready to head out to the church, Alfred went into a panic and started putting the locks and bars on the doors, frantically checking every entrance to the house. The states were starting to get scared by their father's erratic behavior and the paranoid mania that seemed to possess him.

When Alfred locked himself in one of the upstairs bedrooms that night, setting up a post at the window with his gun, Louise had finally had enough.

"Alfred, you will stop zis behavior, at once," she said sharply, having unlocked the door with the spare key. "You 'ave not told us what is going on and ze children are terrified of you."

"I'm trying to protect us," Alfred said, his voice hoarse. "I won't let anything happen to my family."

"What is wrong with you, ma moitié? You act as if we could be attacked at any second."

"That's because we could. I won't let my home meet the same fate as Pigeon Roost or Fort Dearborn."

"As…Alfred, mon amour, what 'appened to you?"

Alfred shifted in his seat.

"Nothing," he denied.

"It is not not'ing. You are 'iding somet'ing from me."

Louise stepped closer to him and Alfred darted to the far side of the room, an expression like that of a wounded animal on his face.

"Alfred, please, tell me what is wrong."

"I…I can't."

"Alfred Freedom Jones, you tell me zis instant!"

She approached closer and closer. Alfred tossed the gun away from him, as if afraid of holding it when his wife was getting so near to him. He clutched at his chest and shut his eyes, his whole body shaking. At last, Louise reached out and pried his hands away, pulling open the loose cotton shirt to reveal the scar on his chest which had not vanished as most injuries did when Alfred got hurt in battle.

"Alfred…what is this?" Louise gasped.

"I can't, it's…it's too much."

"I am your wife and you will tell me what 'appened."
Alfred collapsed to the floor and Louise instinctively held onto him, letting him press his face to her shoulder as everything came out. All the death he had witnessed, the horror of what his sister had done to him and Miami, the senseless slaughter of unarmed civilians, and the torturous images which came to him in his sleep, the things which fed his fear for the safety of his family. He was truly and abjectly terrified that what happened to the settlers could just as easily happen to Louise and the children. He had become so withdrawn because, whenever he looked at his family, he pictured them lying lifeless and bloody just like the victims at Dearborn and Pigeon Roost. At night, his dreams were filled with visions of restless ghosts covered in blood, screaming at him that he had brought about their deaths.

Louise simply held him close and let him voice everything which had plagued him. Silently, Louise cursed Tecumseh and his followers for perpetrating such evil in the name of liberation. As much as she could respect the man as a capable leader and warrior, and understand his resentment of white encroachment on tribal lands, she hated what the man had done to her husband.

Alfred then confided in her the pain he often felt as his Native people warred with his adopted people. Alfred may have been white on the surface, but the blood in his veins was that of his mother. He was caught between two worlds and the division was tearing him apart inside. He heard the cries of the Natives for justice against those who took their lands from them, but he also heard the pleas of the whites who wanted to establish homes for their own families. He couldn't listen to one without being moved to sympathy for the other. The hatred of the two sides for each other was tormenting him and each act of violence left Alfred with nothing but guilt and shame.

"Alfred, ma moitié, you need to rest," Louise told him, helping him to stand and leading him to their bedroom. "Lie still and I will bring somet'ing to 'elp you sleep."

"But, the nightmares-"

"I will take care of it."

She guided him to lie down on the bed and bustled past the curious stares of the children. A few minutes later, she returned carrying a glass filled with some strange, dark liquid which smelled faintly of lavender.

"Drink zis," Louise said, handing him the glass.

Alfred examined it briefly before downing the substance, certain that Louise would never give him anything harmful. After a minute or so, his eyes drifted shut and he was in a deep, peaceful sleep. Louise smiled and nodded, and then made her way back downstairs. She passed by the children, again, and headed in the direction of the root cellar.

"Mother, is Father going to be all right?" Virginia asked.

"He will be fine, darling girl," Louise said, pausing but not turning around when she reached the cellar door. "It will take some time, but all will be well."

"We heard what he said," Tennessee spoke up. "About Tecumseh's attacks. What're we gonna do, Mama?"

"Do not worry, sweet child." Louise's voice lowered a bit. "I can promise you, before ze next year is done, Tecumseh will be dead in 'is grave."

With that, she opened the door to the cellar and stepped inside. The sound of a 'clack, clack’ echoing as she walked down the stairs, deeper into the darkness.
January 23rd, 1813

Kentucky crouched low behind a fallen log, doing his best not to let his fears show in front of his little brother. Ohio was shaking as he clutched the musket which was twice as tall as the boy, himself.

Everything had gone deathly silent.

The two boys had fled from Frenchtown where the British and Natives had beaten the militiamen and taken the commanding officer, James Winchester, prisoner. The British rounded up any of the survivors from the recent battles and marched them away as captives, leaving behind the wounded to await the arrival of the American reinforcements which the British commander suspected were coming. No sooner had the British withdrawn than the Natives began ransacking the town, killing any who tried to flee, and burning the buildings where the wounded lay, unable to escape.

Kentucky and Ohio had managed to stay out of sight of the British, but they knew the Natives would not allow them to leave alive.

Their hearts thudded in their chests and they could see their breaths rising in front of them in the bitter cold. They had wanted to prove themselves to their father, to show that they could handle being on the frontlines in the northwest. Kentucky had brought a team of his best and strongest men to enlist in the war effort; now, however, many of those men were no more than mangled bodies littering the battlefield and the ravaged town.

Ohio started to whimper and Kentucky shushed him. They couldn't afford to give away their position. They were being hunted.

As they listened closely, they could hear the soft crunch of snow being trod on. Kentucky peeked around the log they were using as cover and saw several tall figures dressed in buckskins gathered just on the other side. Quickly darting back so as not to be spotted, Kentucky clutched his own weapon to his chest and tried to keep his breathing steady. He was desperately praying that his condition wouldn't choose that moment to act up – only a few years ago, Kentucky had collapsed in a seizure for the first time, leading his family to discover he suffered from epilepsy.

It would be just their luck if he suddenly had a fit.

Every sound seemed to be magnified a hundred times. Every shuddering breath, every traitorous heartbeat, everything was so much louder in that instant than they had ever known before. It was agonizing, waiting for their pursuers to leave. Then, finally, they heard the footfalls fade into the distance and the two boys heaved soft sighs of relief. Kentucky was the first to his feet, rising up slowly from behind the log.

And he froze in horror as he realized his mistake.

Their pursuers hadn't left. They had merely drawn back a short distance. As one, a half-dozen pairs of eyes landed on the boy. The emotionless stares that pierced him brought to mind a single word, conveying their intentions as clearly as a full moon cuts through the inky black of the night sky. Death.

"Run!" Kentucky screamed and he and Ohio bolted, followed closely by the warriors.

By that point, they knew fighting back would be pointless and dropped their heavy muskets to enable them to run more quickly. They dodged around the trees, searching for some way out or some
new place to hide. They ran until their lungs burned, and even then they kept going.

However, the strain became too much for Kentucky, who was already badly hurt from the battle the day before, and he dropped to his knees, choking. With what little breath he still had in him, he shouted at Ohio to keep running, before succumbing to a fit, thrashing wildly. Ohio glanced back only once, seeing their pursuers descend upon Kentucky with daggers at the ready.

Fighting back the frightened tears, Ohio charged on as fast as he could through the pain and chill that had seeped into his very bones. He soon found himself at the icy banks of the River Raisin.

Hoping to find some measure of safety, Ohio resolved to cross to the other side. Hearing the whooping cries behind him, he leapt in, fighting back a scream as the water's chill felt like dozens of knives plunging into him. As fast as he could, Ohio waded through, feeling what little warmth and strength he had left draining rapidly. As the water became too deep to wade, Ohio grit his teeth and began to swim.

As the Natives reached the bank of the river, they began to fire their own muskets at him. Ohio dared not look back but kept pushing on and on. His limbs ached so much he could barely bring himself to move, but he still kept at it, determined that he would reach the other side. Finally, finally, he pulled himself out of the water and tried to steady himself against a tree. He gave a weak, half-hearted laugh at his escape, trying not to think about Kentucky lying dead somewhere, likely having been stripped of his scalp, for good measure.

His drenched clothes began to freeze and he found that even walking had become immensely difficult as he made his way further and further from the river. He was exhausted and sore, and he just wanted to rest. He remembered Pennsylvania warning him to never, ever stop and rest when one is exposed to the elements in Winter, that the only way to stay alive was to keep one's blood pumping. But Ohio was just so tired, surely it wouldn't hurt to rest, just for a little while?

He finally fell to the ground on some withered leaves that were fairly free of snow cover. As he looked back up, he noticed a red line. Furrowing his brow in confusion, Ohio's eyes followed the path of the line, he saw it leading closer and closer to him until his gaze fell upon a weeping hole in his leg. One of the bullets fired at him had struck him in the leg, but he was too numb to feel it.

Lying back on his makeshift cot on the forest floor, Ohio's vision began to dim and he felt strangely disconnected with everything around him.

*Just a little rest, he thought to himself. Just for a little while. I already feel warmer...It doesn't hurt anymore...*

*Several days later...*

It took an entire division to prevent Alfred from going out on his own to hunt down his sons' killers.

When he was finally calmed down, he refused to leave the tent where his sons were being kept until they revived. He would allow no one else in the tent with him, not even General Harrison. Alfred also promised a dire retribution against James Winchester, whom he blamed entirely for the massacre.

As it was, Kentucky was lying there with his throat slit and numerous stab wounds (though, thankfully, he had not been scalped as many of his soldiers had been) and Ohio's entire body had turned blue from the frost which had smothered the life out of him (they had had to chip his frozen
clothes off his body a piece at a time).

It was something Alfred had always hoped to spare his children from having to experience. This would be Kentucky's and Ohio's first deaths, and Alfred could only pray they wouldn't have others. It was a horrible and frightening experience, as Alfred could, himself, attest. His own first death had been from starvation shortly after he was separated from the Iroquois as a child. It had been so traumatizing that he still remembered it, even as he forgot his own family while living with England. Thankfully, he hadn't died a second time until his Revolution began, but it was still a haunting memory.

Now, his two youngest sons were going through it. That darkness and uncertainty. Alfred remembered what it was like to be dead. There was a long, black tunnel filled with voices, all trying to call out to him. He knew something was lurking out of sight and something else was there at the end of the tunnel, but he was compelled to wait in that lonely abyss until something prompted him to walk backwards until he found himself falling back into his own body. It was not a painless experience, either, when the soul reconnected to the flesh.

He would not have wished it on anybody, least of all his own children.

Even though the rational part of his brain told him that they would wake up again, sooner or later, the 'father' in him wanted only revenge. He knew England wasn't even on his shores to fight this war like it should be fought, but was focusing all his attention on bringing down France and France's boss Napoleon. Instead, England left it to Canada and to the tribes to resolve the 'America problem.' Alfred was a small matter in England's grand plans, little more than an annoyance.

Louise had warned Alfred that leaving Canada to his own devies was a risk, but Alfred still wanted as little involvement in fighting his twin as possible. While some of his politicians, even Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Madison, had long desired to bring Canada under the control of the United States and finally oust the British presence in North America completely, most Americans wanted only to protect their freedom and ensure their safety and security as a nation, which they couldn't do as long as all these threats existed. Unfortunately for Alfred, the only way for him to really combat these threats was to take the fight to Canada and try to eliminate England's military strongholds.

He had no issue with Canada, save the bitterness that his brother had abandoned him and was enabling England's forces to harm Americans, but he honestly could not see any other option than giving his consent to an invasion plan Louise had devised which Alfred had, until that point, furiously opposed.

Alfred held Ohio's small, frozen hand and told himself that he would do what needed to be done.

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*Early April, 1813*

Alfred stood over the map on the table, his eyes taking in every detail of the area they were planning to attack.

If they pulled this off right, England's forces would be stymied and Alfred would finally be able to speak to Canada, to convince his brother to join in their cause and be part of Alfred's family, again. He would show his brother that the only way forward, the only way to truly be free, was to cast off any allegiance to foreign nations like England and become part of a new, better system.

Alfred hoped his brother would forgive him. Canada could hold long grudges, even if he never
openly acted on them – his brother had always been more of a subtle person when it came to anger… or, really, anything. He was sure, though, that Canada would overlook it when he learned of the states, his nieces and nephews. Canada had always been a big softy at heart and he'd certainly never do anything to hurt children, least of all his own twin brother's children.

Alfred just wished Louise would stop pressuring him to take a more… \textit{aggressive} approach to this campaign.

"Zese English need to be taught a lesson, \textit{ma moitié}," she said for the hundredth time, pressing against his back and looking over his shoulder at the map. "Zey need to learn ze penalty for 'urting our people."

"Louise, we have been over this," Alfred said. "I will not repay violence in kind. I will not stoop to their level. I am a better person than that."

"I am not asking zat you should slaughter women and children, even zough zese English do not seem to care about what 'appens to ze innocent. I suggest only zat we do somet'ing to bring our enemies reason to despair. We need not even kill, merely…cause a little destruction as a warning-"

"I don't want to discuss this, anymore. We have a simple and straightforward plan. We go in, we take over any military structures, we secure the city of York, we find my brother and bring him back to camp, and we leave civilians out of it. Once the war is over, we withdraw. That is all I want to hear on the matter."

Louise pulled away and Alfred could feel the heat in her glare.

\textit{April 27th, 1813}

Alfred had been very serious when he said he didn't want to escalate the situation by causing unnecessary damage, particularly when it concerned his twin brother.

Since he'd started becoming more active in sorting out the problems in the northwest, Alfred had been wrestling with something in his head. It was subtle, at first, like a faint whisper in the back of his mind. It told him things, very \textit{unpleasant} things. Alfred remembered something faintly similar when he was in the midst of his Revolution, but he had been so caught up in the frenzy of that war that he simply let whatever emotion he had govern his actions, trusting his instincts to lead the way to victory. This new feeling fed on those old inclinations, telling Alfred to give in to his thirst for revenge against the ones who hurt his family.

Lately, though, the whispers had become even more worrying.

He would be engulfed by one of his nightmares, seeing the cold, lifeless bodies of his children and his wife in practically every one of those dreams, and he would hear a voice telling him that he had to get his enemies before they could get his family. The voice would fuel his anger, telling him that England, Canada, and many of the Native tribes were undeserving of mercy, as they would show his family and his people none.

Alfred would wake up feeling dirty and sick, as if some kind of miasma was following him. As if he were the victim of some horrible curse.

But Alfred tried to be stronger than the voice. He refused to compromise his morals for the sake of revenge, fear, and hate. He was a better man than that, and he was certain his people were better than
Unfortunately, on that day, everything he believed in and everything he thought he stood for turned to a bitter gall.

He had no idea how it had happened. Both Alfred and the commanding officers had given strict orders for how the battle was meant to go. None of those orders even remotely allowed for the American troops to begin a brutal rampage in the city of York, burning homes and looting like common street thugs. It disgusted Alfred in a way he'd never quite known, before.

Or, perhaps, he'd merely been playing at being blind to the faults of his people.

How many times had he looked the other way when the colonists – now his citizens – had done something petty, vindictive, or even cruel to those who held views contrary to their own? Hadn't Alfred turned aside and permitted his Patriot brothers and fathers to hound Loyalists out of their homes, forcing them to flee to England and Canada to spare themselves from persecution? Hadn't he dismissed the complaints of the tribes against the white settlers encroaching on their lands as simply 'misunderstandings'?

They deserve this, that horrible voice echoed in his mind. They brought it on themselves. Your brother brought it on himself.

"No one deserves this," Alfred said to himself, watching a family flee their home as Alfred's own men set it alight. "I never should have come here."

They are enemies. Enemies must all burn. Pick up a torch. Finish this. You know you want to.

"No…no, I won't."

Alfred railed against the voice in his head and began shouting at the men to pull back, physically grabbing the stubborn ones and shoving them away. He started to berate them, loudly and harshly, for their behavior. Some tried to protest this treatment, but Alfred would hear none of it and continued his attempt to quell the carnage being inflicted on the city.

He ran through the city as fast as he could, desperately trying to catch and rein in as many of his men as possible, but he soon found himself overwhelmed.

Then, out of a cloud of smoke, choking and clutching his chest in pain, was Canada.

"Matthew!" Alfred called out. "Matthew!"

Canada stared up at him in surprise, and then his violet gaze narrowed in anger. As Alfred tried to rush over to help his brother, to explain that this was not his doing, Canada stumbled away as quickly as he could under the circumstances.

"Matthew! Matthew, wait! Please, listen to me!"

"Leave me alone!" Canada shouted back, causing Alfred to freeze. He had never heard his brother raise his voice like that, and never with such fury. "Get away from me!"

"Matthew, you have to believe me, I didn't!"

"Just go away! Get out! I hate you! I hate you!"

Alfred stood rooted to the spot. Never, in all their arguments, had Canada ever told Alfred that he
hated him. Even though Alfred had done everything he could to prevent this from happening, he wasn't able to totally control the actions of his people. He wanted Canada to know that, to understand that this was never his goal. He wanted them to be brought closer together not further divided. It cut Alfred deeply, and he knew this was not something Canada would ever forgive. And, to be completely honest, Alfred wasn't certain he could forgive himself.

Alfred may have won the battle, that day, but he had never felt so defeated in his life.

Several days later...

The voice in Alfred's head was mocking him.

As Alfred had watched his brother walk away, seething in hatred for him, the voice had screamed at Alfred to kill him, to pull out a pistol and shoot Canada in the back. The compulsion grew so strong that Alfred was tempted to shoot himself just to make it stop. Now, the voice simply told him to keep pressing on against his opponent, to bleed him dry and crush everything that mattered to him.

At that point, Alfred knew there was only one thing he could do. He had to retreat.

He had to leave before he could make a terrible situation any worse. Louise had argued with him long into the night about it, claiming they could capture Canada if they just kept at it a little while longer. But Alfred was done with this. He wanted nothing further to do with trying to capture his brother and forcing Canada to join him.

The rest of the war would be focused on retaining and defending their own lands. They needed to regain control of several forts the British forces had taken and secure more vulnerable areas. What was more, Alfred had bad feelings coming to him about something brewing in the south.

"There are more important things to worry about, Louise," Alfred said as he began shoving his clothes into his pack. "We need to rethink our plans. We can't win here. Canada's people all hate us after what happened in York. There are rumors that the Iroquois tribes that are allied with the British are planning a retaliatory attack against us. We can't stay."

"So we flee like cowards?" Louise snapped, resting her hands on her hips. "I thought you were braver zan zat, mon amour."

"It's not a question of bravery! This is about survival. It's about living to fight another day and not constantly expecting to get a different result by repeating a failed plan. We've lost here. There was no victory whatsoever in what happened at York. The only way I can protect us, protect you and the children, is to withdraw."

Alfred ran a hand through his hair and then drew close to his wife, resting his hands gently on her shoulders and looking her straight in the eye.

"Look, I don't like admitting defeat," he said. "Failure never sits well with me. But, I'm prepared to admit that I've gotten in over my head on this one." He dropped his hands down to hold hers. "You and the children mean everything to me. I don't want to think of you all being in danger. But trying to keep this up will only hurt all of us the longer we remain here."

Louise teared up and pulled Alfred into a tight embrace, crying softly against him as he stroked her hair.
"I am scared, ma moitié," she said. "I am scared of what ze consequences will be if we retreat now. If zey see us as weak."

"Everything will be all right. I will take care of it. I promise."

May, 1813

In the southern region of the United States, there were five Native tribes which were classified as 'civilized' by the Western world. The Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole.

The Muscogee Creek tribe was divided into two personifications, Upper and Lower. Lower Creek was a very sweet, gentle young lady who got on well with everyone she met, frequently making friends among the different people she called her neighbors. While she did try to keep to the practices and traditions of her people, she often found herself adapting to the practices of the whites, especially as her people began to intermarry with the different groups. In contrast to this, Upper Creek was something of a recluse; he did not trust whites and was bitterly resentful of the "civilizing programs" sponsored by men like Benjamin Hawkins and supported by the old chiefs of the Muscogee.

Lower Creek frequently tried to talk to Upper Creek about his growing resentment, but he would constantly brush her off and retreat to his favorite hunting grounds.

"Sometimes, I wonder about Chekilli," Lower Creek said, using her brother's human name, as she stood by her kitchen fire cooking.

"What's wrong, Auntie?" Georgia asked as she and Tennessee helped shuck corn. The two states had been invited to stay with their aunt while they dealt with some of the growing problems the south was facing in the war.

"He's been acting so strange, lately. He never talks to me openly, anymore. At least, not without it turning into an argument. And he treats the neighbors as if they're vermin."

"He was a bit frosty towards us when we showed up," Georgia said thoughtfully. "Think we should be worried, Auntie?"

Lower Creek bit her lip, uncertain of how to respond. While she would never openly accuse her brother of being a threat to his own family, she had to admit that Upper Creek had been getting more and more withdrawn and moody. The last time she spoke with him, he was rude and dismissive. With rumors circulating that Tecumseh had started to extend his unification efforts to the southern tribes, Lower Creek was concerned about what effect the man's words might have on discontented tribes like Upper Creek. Even though Lower Creek could understand the complaints of her fellow tribes, could see the anger and resentment towards the whites for trespassing into their lands and trying to force the tribes to assimilate to European culture, she found the notion of violent retaliation to be deplorable and counterproductive.

Lower Creek wasn't naïve enough to consider the white encroachment and cultural assimilation to be harmless, though. As a tribe, she knew that there had to be a line that her people couldn't cross, as fully abandoning her own culture and beliefs was a certain path to her own death as a personification. She was willing to embrace a number of things the whites introduced to her people, even going so far as to convert to Christianity (whilst also continuing to incorporate her older rituals into her worship), but there would always be things which she, as a Muscogee woman, could never compromise on.
Her nieces took the contemplative silence for an affirmative; nervous expressions now forming on their faces.

"Nila!" a voice yelled out, referring to Lower Creek by her human name. "Nila!" Suddenly, the haggard figure of a young man stumbled into the kitchen. "Nila, thank goodness," he gasped, clearly short on breath. "We need to leave. We need to leave, right now."

"Yuchi, what is it?" Lower Creek asked. The Yuchi tribe was her younger brother; he depended heavily on her since his people were decimated by disease and wars during the last century.

"It's Chekilli. He has a group of armed warriors and they are heading this way. We have to go!"

"What…why would he-?"

"There's no time! Grab what you can and meet me by the horses! I will go and warn the rest of the village."

Lower Creek immediately abandoned what she was doing and she and the two states hastily gathered some clothes and food. As they hurried over to where the horses were kept, they could hear a warning bell ringing and saw other families abandoning their homes. Lower Creek tossed their bags into one of the wagon carts, ushering the girls to get into it, as well, and began hooking up her horses to the harnesses. The states, too, assisted by helping human children into the cart, trying to ensure that everyone was able to get away from the approaching threat.

They were soon joined by Yuchi, who helped Lower Creek finish fastening the horses in. The two tribes got into the front of the wagon, and Lower Creek shook the reins and ordered the horses to go. A train of wagons and horse-riders was soon off from the village just as a raiding party descended on the place.

Lower Creek looked back only once, to see the imposing figure of her brother, Upper Creek, set a torch to her house.

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*Early July, 1813*

Alfred glowered to himself as he packed, once again.

He had told his leaders that he wanted nothing more to do with the northwest theater. And how do they respond? They assign him to a top secret mission that was to take place somewhere in the northwest. When he demanded to know why, they told him that he'd sent them a message, saying that he'd changed his mind about not returning to the place. He didn't remember sending any message.

Of course, he'd been blacking out a lot lately. He would shut his eyes for a moment and, when he opened them, it would be hours later and he'd have no memory of what had happened. Sometimes, he'd wake up and find whole documents written in his handwriting, none of which he could recall even thinking about. Occasionally, those documents contained things that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up – he burned every one of those papers.

All the same, however, he did not want to leave his family during a period of such uncertainty.

Last month, Massachusetts had been brought home after a brutal naval battle off the shores of Boston, in which the HMS *Shannon* captured the USS *Chesapeake*. Pennsylvania and Ohio kept an
eye on him until they could get him to a more secure location. Rhode Island was still missing, though, and no one had any idea of where to look for him. Connecticut continued to be obstinate and had refused summons to be with the family; some of the states were beginning to suspect he was plotting treason against the Union.

"I don't want to do this," Alfred said. "I really don't want to do this."

"You have to, Father," Delaware said in her soft, even voice. "You have your orders."

"I know. Can I trust you to keep everything together for me, Christina?"

Delaware nodded.

"I'll do my best," she said.

"That's my girl." Alfred smiled at his firstborn. While he knew Louise would be responsible for most of the management of the family, he knew that she couldn't do everything by herself. As the eldest child, it fell to Delaware to pick up any slack. She might be one of the quietest states, but she was not a force to be taken lightly. Behind those blue eyes was a will of iron and a fearsome wrath.

"I packed you some apple pie for the trip, Father," she said, handing him a basket.

Later…

The family waved goodbye from the steps of the house as Alfred joined his division and set off for destinations unknown.

The states were all on-edge. There was a major conflict coming, but they weren't sure what it would be or who would emerge as the victor. New York had also decided to leave, as he feared the British and Canadians would likely attempt to attack him in retaliation for the invasion several months earlier. Maryland and Virginia had departed for Washington D.C. to help manage things at the White House and assist the president with reviewing intelligence reports. Pennsylvania was also going to D.C. to discuss military expansion and financing, as she felt they could be doing more to boost enlistment numbers. Massachusetts was determined to return to his responsibilities on the high seas. And New Hampshire and Vermont were planning to go on a scouting mission along the border.

"You are not all leaving at once," Louise insisted as they all reentered the house. "I insist zat we spend some time as a family."

New Hampshire huffed, but kept her comments to herself. It was no secret that most of the New England states still carried a strong dislike for their stepmother, and New Hampshire was particularly mistrustful.

The Carolinas instantly started chattering about music and dancing. New York and New Jersey began arguing about games, as New York wanted to play cards but New Jersey wished to try some new game called "Snapdragon" (though everyone vetoed the latter's suggestion when she revealed that it involved booze and an open flame). A number of states wanted some kind of sport, something in which they could tackle each other into the mud.

It was as they were arguing that a messenger arrived and handed a letter to Louise. She quickly opened it and paled at its contents.
"Sadly, I must take back my words," she said. "I must, myself, leave *immédiatement.*"

"What's wrong, Mother?" Virginia asked. Louise handed her the letter. Virginia read through it and gasped before passing it off to Delaware. "It's from one of our aunts. She says that she, Georgia, and Tennessee have had to take refuge in a fort. The Creek have declared a civil war against each other."

The states began to mutter amongst themselves.

"We need to depart, at once," Louise said. "I am sorry *zat* you children are being called into *zis* war, again. But, I trust you all to conduct yourselves responsibly and as a family."

Everyone nodded and instantly ran about the house, preparing for their sudden call to duty.

Kentucky and Ohio were sent to start recruiting more soldiers, to tell every American what was going on in the war and rally support. New Jersey and Delaware decided to join Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania in D.C. to provide further assistance to the main base of operations. The other states were to continue on to their original missions.

As Louise mounted her horse, her infant daughter Louisiana in a sling on her back (as she refused to leave the child behind), she prayed they would arrive in time.

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*August 30th, 1813*

Georgia bit at her nails in worry as she looked out from the battlements of Fort Mims.

She, her aunt, her uncle Yuchi, her youngest sister, and her stepmother were all stuck in a poorly-defended fort with a drunk commander, one Major Beasley, waiting for reinforcements to come their way...if they even knew to come. Tennessee had left to locate the reinforcements and send them in the right direction.

As she watched the surrounding woods, Georgia was positive that something bad was going to happen. Only the day before, two slaves living in the fort had gone out to forage and came back claiming they'd seen "painted warriors" lurking about. Major Beasley screamed himself purple, accusing the two slaves of raising false alarms, and ordered one of the slaves to be flogged when he continued to insist that they were in danger.

Early that morning, one of the scouts came back and verified that he saw something out there, but Beasley, already deep in his cups, told the scout he could keep his fool mouth shut and that the fort could easily withstand any number of Indians.

With more than five-hundred people living in the fort, many of whom were Lower Creek's civilians and a number of unarmed black slaves and freedmen, Georgia was not satisfied with dismissing threats out of hand. Especially not since Yuchi had revealed Upper Creek's monstrous intentions.

Once Georgia, Tennessee, Lower Creek, and Yuchi had escaped from the attack and gotten to a safe hiding place, Yuchi told them that he had been following his brother for some time to learn what was happening to him. It seemed that Tecumseh's words had had even more of an impact than anyone could have anticipated. Upper Creek, who already hated whites, had been goaded on by one of his people, a man called "Red Eagle" (whose true name was "William Weatherford"), into launching a full-scale war against his sister and her people.

The purpose of the war was to eradicate the *métis*, the Indians of mixed Native and white heritage,
and restore the Creek to the ways of their ancestors. Upper Creek had taken on the new name "Red Stick" and began targeting mixed-blood families. It was incredibly hypocritical, too, as so many of the Creek, including men like Weatherford or the alleged prophet Peter McQueen, were of mixed ancestry. The Creek had never been particularly prejudiced against intermarriage with other peoples in the past, but the Red Sticks were blinded by their hatred.

Georgia couldn't let something like that build up and sent for the nearest division of the Armed Forces. In July, around the time that Louise received the letter asking for help, Georgia had authorized an attack against Red Stick as he and his men returned from Pensacola, Florida, where the Spanish authorities had sold them munitions. The Battle of Burnt Corn had nearly been successful, until the American troops let down their guard and ended up being routed by a retaliatory attack by Red Stick and his men.

Red Stick was, undoubtedly, hungry for further revenge. Considering that one of his adversaries in the fight, Captain Dixon Bailey, was also at Fort Mims, it would only be a fool who assumed he wouldn't launch a strike against them.

And such a fool, it seemed, was Major Daniel Beasley.

No pickets, no extra watches, no sentry duties, whatsoever. Beasley even refused to make an attempt to get the eastern gate shut, as sand had built up and kept it from closing all the way.

Georgia wasn't even technically supposed to be up on the ramparts. The last time Beasley spotted her up there, he called her a "stupid negress" and ordered her to keep to her cabin and not butt in where she wasn't wanted. It was easy to see that the major was not ranking particularly high on Georgia's list of preferred company.

Thankfully, the man was taking lunch and wouldn't be out to do his rounds for another hour or so. Which meant it was left to Captain Bailey to try and maintain everything. Georgia was convinced that Bailey must be a saint if he was able to put up with Beasley's idiocy, especially after Beasley had ridiculed Bailey for his mixed ancestry. It couldn't have been easy serving as second-in-command to someone like that.

Georgia was about to head back down when she saw them. Racing towards the fort like a massive wave, the Red Stick Creek were about to surge upon them.

Georgia rushed to the warning bell and began ringing it like it was the end of all days. The residents of the fort poured out of their homes, the militiamen picked up their muskets, and Captain Bailey began shouting for the men to get in formation while Major Beasley stumbled out of his quarters – alcohol fumes still hanging heavily around him – and demanded to know what was happening.

All at once, the swarm of Red Sticks crashed against the gate en masse, pushing through practically unimpeded. There was utter chaos as Captain Bailey frantically tried to organize the men to push back, but there were just too many.

"Fall back!" Bailey shouted. "Fall back!"

The defenders withdrew to the inner enclosure. Bailey saw Georgia trapped on the ramparts and cut through a row of attackers to reach her. He motioned for Georgia to take hold of him; as she was still physically a child, it was not too difficult for him to carry her. Bailey rushed back to his defensive line and, once he was certain everyone was safely inside, he ordered the inner gate shut and sealed.

"Belle!" Louise shouted, rushing over to her stepdaughter and checking her for injuries before pulling her into a relieved hug while Lower Creek stood by with little Louisiana.
After about an hour, the pounding on the gate stopped. Everything went quiet. One of the men went up to the inner rampart and reported that the Red Sticks had pulled back and were standing huddled in a circle, discussing something amongst themselves.

"They're holding a war council," Lower Creek said. "They're trying to decide if they can make a successful breach of our defenses again, since the first was only too easy."

"Where is Major Beasley?" Louise snarled, her face reddening in outrage. "I will tear 'is 'ead off for allowing zis to 'appen!"

"I think someone beat you to it, Madam," said Bailey, peering through a gap in the gate. "He's already been got."

A furious swear appeared to be on the tip of Louise's tongue, but she somehow found the strength to restrain it. Ladies do not swear in public (well, they shouldn't swear, at all, but who's to know if they do so in private?).

With Beasley dead, command of the fort now fell to Bailey. Bailey instantly began to rally the defenders and started formulating a plan to help the civilians escape; he was certain they could hold off the attackers, as most Indian raids like this tended to fade out when met with a strong resistance. It was around three o'clock when the second attack came. A horrific whooping sound and fierce banging against the gate filled the defenders' hearts with dread.

Then, over the heads of the astonished residents of Fort Mims, there was a shaft of light. The light passed over them to collide with the bastion, the building at the very center of the fort, setting it ablaze. People in the fort began to scream and panic as the fire rapidly started to spread to the other buildings, fueled even more by a series of additional flaming arrows fired into the fort to follow the first.

Despite this, Bailey, Yuchi, most of the militiamen, and a number of Lower Creek's own men held their position as the crashing against the gate became too much and it burst open.

For Georgia, it was as if someone had opened the gates of Hell. Her world was engulfed in fire, gun smoke, screams, blood, and flashes of metal. In the midst of it all was her uncle, Red Stick Creek, his gaze warped by a madness that seemed far beyond comprehension. Georgia also saw Red Stick's leader, William Weatherford, shouting at his men to ease their assault, to focus only on the militiamen, but his words went unheeded as the Red Sticks began a brutal slaughter against the civilians, taking a vicious delight in pursuing their fellow Creeks, the ones they regarded as traitors to their heritage.

Captain Dixon Bailey was one of their main targets, himself, and they spared no time in trying to bring him down. But Bailey was a hardened fighter and would not go down easily. His strength seemed magnified as he saw a house where some of the women and children had taken refuge was set on fire. He couldn't last forever, though, and his wounds became too much for him.

Yuchi took hold of Bailey and helped lead him away from the fighting.

Georgia, Louise, Lower Creek, and little Louisiana had hidden with a few of the civilians behind the loom house where they were frantically digging into the wood to make an escape hole. As the massacre behind them increased in severity, the hopeful escapees finally broke through and bolted for freedom.

Confusion reigned as the people scattered. In the fray, Georgia lost hold of her stepmother's hand and became separated in the woods. It was not even nightfall, yet, but everything felt as though it were
bathed in darkness. Georgia could've sworn the sky had turned black from the smoke pouring out of the burning fort. She could smell it; it reeked of death.

Shouts behind her warned her that the Red Sticks had realized some of the civilians had escaped and Georgia hitched up her skirt and began to run. She stumbled through the foliage, uncertain which way her family had gone or even if she was moving away from the fort rather than back towards it.

A high-pitched, piercing shriek hit her ears. Georgia turned and fumbled her way towards it, worried that someone was in danger. She soon saw through the darkness several tall, painted figures standing over a small, broken body which appeared to have been clubbed to death. It was a child. Not just anyone's child, though. It was Captain Bailey's own son; a harmless little boy who was already sick and likely dying, as it was. That didn't matter to his killers, though; they were too consumed with rage and hate to care whom they hurt.

Georgia accidentally let out a whimper, which she immediately tried to stifle with her hands. Too late.

The tallest of the warriors turned and saw her. It was Red Stick, himself. His dark eyes still ringed by that unfathomable mania. His gaze honed in on her like a wolf's on its prey. He began to advance.

Georgia took flight.

She ignored the cuts that slashed into her from the trees and rocks. When her hair caught in a branch, she tore herself out of it, paying no heed to the stinging in her scalp as chunks of it were ripped out. All she could focus on was getting away as Red Stick closed in on her, a blood-stained club in his hand. Eventually, he got close enough to land a blow that knocked the air from her lungs and left her gasping on the forest floor.

He raised his weapon to strike again when there was a 'whoosh' of wind and sharp 'thunk' sound. Red Stick fell to the ground. A tomahawk lodged in the back of his head. Lower Creek stood a ways behind him, her eyes wide and her breath ragged.

"Georgia, child, come quickly," she said as she returned to herself. "Take my hand and do not let it go."

Lower Creek guided her niece away to where the other escapees were hiding. They arrived just in time to see Captain Bailey take his final breaths.

"At-at least…my son is safe," he said, a sad smile on his lips.

Georgia couldn't bring herself to tell him the awful truth.

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**September 10th, 1813**

Alfred gripped the American flag tightly as the small rowboat cut through the waters of Lake Erie.

At the head of the craft, Alfred's commander, Oliver Hazard Perry, directed the men at the oars while Perry's personal attendant, an African-American man named "Cyrus Tiffany," shouted encouragement to drive the men onward. They had left Perry's flagship, USS *Lawrence*, in order to transfer over to the USS *Niagara* after the *Lawrence* proved unable to get decent fire once in range and was moving far too slowly in the light wind. The *Niagara* had failed to follow into carronade
range, something which prompted Perry to mutter furiously against the other ship's commander, Jesse Elliot.

Through the air there was the whistle and roar of the British guns as the British seized the *Lawrence* and sent most of its remaining crew to the depths of the lake. The guns then turned upon the rowboat, only just missing as the tiny craft moved rapidly through the water. At one point, Cyrus Tiffany threw himself over Perry to shield him from an oncoming cannonball that narrowly avoided felling the commander.

After what felt like an eternity, they reached the *Niagara* and Perry started giving orders to bring the schooners into formation while Perry, himself, would take the helm of the *Niagara*. As Alfred hoisted the flag from the captured *Lawrence* to join the flag of the *Niagara*, he surveyed the maritime battlefield and his eyes widened in amazement. The British fleet had sustained considerable damage in a matter of minutes. As Alfred looked closer, he realized that the ships *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte* had collided, causing untold amounts of destruction to each other.

Alfred couldn't resist a small, vindictive smirk.

The *Niagara*, rather than desert the battle as the British likely expected, had turned on the smoldering vessels of its foes, bearing down on them with deadly intent, as the winds began to shift in the Americans' favor. The British ships didn't stand a chance as *Niagara* sliced through the defensive line and the smaller gunboats and the USS *Caledonia* brought down their own rain of fire on their adversaries.

As *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte* finally untangled themselves, they were met with the full force of the attack and soon found they had no choice but to surrender. Some of the smaller British ships tried to escape, but soon found themselves routed and forced to give themselves up, as well.

The smoke soon cleared and Alfred followed Perry back over to the recaptured *Lawrence* where the severely injured British commander, Robert Barclay, officially offered his surrender to Perry. It was not an insignificant moment. This was a major naval accomplishment for the United States, and an especially proud moment for so young an officer as Perry, who was only twenty-seven years old, to have led the way to victory.

Once the pomp and ceremony were finished and the British troops safely taken into custody, Alfred noticed Perry standing alone at the bow of the *Lawrence*, clutching his own, personal pennant to his chest.

"I did it, old friend," Perry said to himself. "We have met the enemy, and they are ours. I've avenged you."

Alfred caught a glimpse of the words stitched into the pennant. *Don't Give Up the Ship!* The last words spoken by James Lawrence, the captain of the USS *Chesapeake* when it was taken by the HMS *Shannon*. James Lawrence had been one of Oliver Perry's dearest friends.

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*October 5th, 1813*

Alfred was not a particularly patient person.

He was a man who craved action and wanted results as fast as possible. Following the Battle of Lake Erie, Alfred immediately pursued a reclaiming of Detroit for the United States and began preparing himself for another major confrontation.
Perhaps there was something of a Seer in him, as he had a strong suspicion that this battle would have as huge an impact as anything he’d experienced, so far. This was where the war for the northwest would end, one way or another. He could sense Tecumseh was nearby, though just out of reach. It was coming to the moment where Alfred would look into the eyes of the man who had incited so much hatred and conflict in Alfred's home, among Alfred's people.

In Alfred's mind, he could picture things ending with only one sure result. That Tecumseh would be dead before the sun had set.

Alfred was currently waiting in General Harrison's tent to discuss the plan of action. The company was camped near the Thames River not far from the Lenape tribe's settlement at Moraviantown. Harrison's forces had been pushing British Major-General Henry Proctor into a retreat for some time and the man appeared only too eager to get away.

That certainly wouldn't endear the British to their Native allies, Alfred thought a bit cruelly. Alfred remembered the attitudes many of the tribes held for proper war conduct, especially the role of the "chief" (which, in this sense, Procter would be considered, as leader of the British forces in the region). The particular tribes in Tecumseh's confederacy did not have a high regard for cowards and would consider hesitation to attack as a sign of weakness.

Gunfire early that morning, however, revealed that the British had finally decided to make their move.

The line was poorly defended, with no earthworks or fortifications to protect the cannons, and the British troops all looked to be half-asleep, as if Procter had rousted them to arms before they'd even had a chance to cook breakfast, have a cup of tea, and make themselves presentable…as was expected in the British army, or so Alfred always believed.

"All right, gentlemen," Harrison said as the American officers gathered to discuss their plan. "Here is how it is going to go. Johnson, you will take the mounted riflemen and make a frontal attack on the regulars. This will allow time for the other divisions to block off escape for the Indians as they give flanking fire from the swamp so that the major force can sweep through to finish the enemy off."

"You can count on me, sir," James Johnson said proudly, sharing a confident smile with his brother Richard.

"Bear in mind that it will be dangerous."

"Not to worry, General! We Kentuckians never back down from danger."

The Johnson brothers might not have been the young bucks they once were, but that youthful vigor had been reignited by the prospect of leading a glorious charge into battle. Harrison shook his head at the enthusiasm, though a small smile formed on his lips. Harrison laid out a few more details of the plan before dismissing everyone to their positions.

"Alfred," Harrison said. "If it's all right with you, could you go with Johnson? Make sure he doesn't hurt himself too badly?"

"Sure thing, sir!" Alfred said brightly. He grabbed his musket and headed for the horses.

When Harrison asked Alfred to make sure Johnson didn't hurt himself 'too badly' he probably meant that he didn't want Johnson to end up with five bullets in him. Of course, considering James Johnson
was still moving about and screaming for revenge for the massacre at River Raisin, Alfred considered it a win.

The plan had gone off about as well as expected. A number of Johnson's men had been killed in the charge, but they sliced through the British ranks like a hot knife through butter. The British, who were tired, demoralized, starving, and completely fed up with Proctor's idiocy, either chose to run, play dead, or throw down their guns in surrender.

Only Tecumseh's men put up a real resistance and refused to back down. Alfred could practically feel the disgust for the British soldiers radiating from the Indian lines. For the Indians, retreat was not an option.

Alfred couldn't wait for the main force to arrive. He needed a real fight and he wasn't going to get it from the British. The voice that had haunted Alfred at York barely had to say anything in that instant to drive Alfred towards the Indian lines. His blue eyes shone as they searched the dense swamp marsh for their target. Briefly, Alfred thought he recognized a sibling or two of his, but he dismissed it. He wasn't there for the tribes, themselves…all he wanted was Tecumseh.

As he went deeper into their ranks, studiously avoiding bullets and channeling the instincts born of his deeper, more spiritual connection to the land he called his own, Alfred hunted for the wily opponent who had always managed to slip from his grasp. His mind was filled with all the things Tecumseh had done since he began his uprising, even going further back to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1795. For so long, Alfred had tried to ignore Tecumseh, had tried to distance himself from the wars with the Native tribes, but it had become impossible after the Battle of Tippecanoe.

Alfred never could have thought himself capable of hating one of his own humans. He might be the United States, but he also felt an unbreakable link to every single tribe and tribal land, every territory, every person who resided within him. They were his lifeblood and his source of strength.

Tecumseh was no different. But Tecumseh was also a threat. And threats needed to be stopped.

Finally, Alfred picked up on the sound of gunshots and raced forward to find an elderly man in a weather-beaten American uniform collapse to the ground as blood stained his blue uniform red. Alfred looked at the old man and knew everything about him – William Whitley, Revolutionary War veteran, mid-sixties, son of Irish immigrants Solomon Whitley and Elizabeth Barnett, three brothers and five sisters, husband to Esther Fuller, father to eleven children, grandfather to even more, lived as a frontiersman most of his life, held a grudge against the Indians for threatening him and his family so often, wanted to die serving his country.

Whitley clearly got his wish, as the great warrior Tecumseh lay on the ground clutching a fatal wound in his side where the old man had shot him.

Alfred approached, slinging his musket over his shoulder and drawing out a pistol. He'd give Tecumseh enough respect to make his death quick and clean instead of painful and lingering. The voice in Alfred's head told him it was more than Tecumseh deserved for all the pain he'd caused.

"Are you ready to meet the Great Spirit?" Alfred said in the Shawnee language, readying himself to aim the gun.

Tecumseh spat at him.

"Traitor!" he shouted. "I know who you are, Alfred Jones. I know what you are!"

"Then why have you fought against me?" Alfred demanded. "Why did you hurt my family? Why
"Your people," Tecumseh sneered. "They are not your people. They were never your people. They are nothing more than thieves. Children of the Evil One. And you have made yourself an outsider to your own flesh and blood. You and every other tribe who stood against us. You should have been the first one to cast out the white man, you should have saved us from the wars and disease that took the lives of so many of your true people. I waited for you to come and save us. You. Did. Nothing!"

It was then that Alfred met Tecumseh's gaze. Just as with Whitley, Alfred could see Tecumseh's entire life, though his was riddled with far more complicated events. Born in 1768, son of Puckshinwa and Methotaske, seven siblings (including his brothers Cheeseekau, Kumskauskau, and Tenskwatav, and his sister Tecumapese), raised by his aunt and eldest brother after his father was killed by white men, driven from place to place by whites burning his family's homes repeatedly, father to a son and daughter by two different women (his son by his wife Mamate who left him, his daughter by a Cherokee woman who remained with her own people), witnessed his brother Tenskwatav struggle with alcoholism before turning into a religious fanatic, watched treaties with the whites be violated over and over and over…

Alfred had seen a number of men like Tecumseh. Joseph Brant, Little Turtle, Blue Jacket, Metacomet, Opechancanough…all of them only ever wanted one thing. They wanted the white men gone and the land secured for their people.

Alfred reared back as if struck and Tecumseh began to laugh coldly, almost hysterically. "Now, do you see?" he said. "We all belong to one family; we are all children of the Great Spirit; we walk in the same path; slake our thirst at the same spring; and now affairs of the greatest concern lead us to smoke the pipe around the same council fire! The red men have borne many and great injuries; they ought to suffer them no longer."

He was quoting lines from one of his earlier speeches, one he'd given to the Osages. Something about it reminded Alfred of a line in one of Shakespeare's plays – Alfred would never admit it, but he still kept the book of Shakespeare's works which England had once given him as a present and read through it frequently. The line he thought of was from the Merchant of Venice, something the character Shylock said: "Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that." While Shylock had been speaking about the persecution he faced as a Jew, the words could just as easily apply to men like Tecumseh, decrying the injustice they and the other Indians faced.

Tecumseh was the Indians' Shylock coming for the pound of flesh he felt he was owed for every hurt, every insult, and every wrongdoing he and the Native people had suffered.

That didn't make what he'd done right, but Alfred felt all the hatred he, himself, had carried draining out of him as he no longer felt that he was in any position to pass judgement on the man. If he did kill Tecumseh now, it wouldn't be out of vengeance.

"Whatever else happens, you won't leave this place alive," Alfred said. "You've lost too much blood, by now, and your army is scattered. It's over. Do you want me to speed you on your way?"

Tecumseh's expression fell and he looked up to see his people fleeing from the battle as Harrison's forces ran them down. Most men would have broken down at a sight, but Tecumseh still held himself upright and with as much dignity as a dying man could. He reached a shaking hand up to pull open his shirt and expose the spot over his heart, indicating to Alfred that he was ready to face
death and wanted it to come swiftly and with honor.

"This war will never be over," he said. "As long as the red man lives, he will fight for what is his. Remember, oh great United States of America, that you might wear a white man's face, but your soul is still red. You will always be ours."

Alfred raised the pistol once again and fired.

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November 4th, 1813

Delaware let out a quiet huff of air as she picked up another report.

The states had had to become acquainted with how to complete paperwork fairly early in their education. Their father insisted that it was necessary if they wanted to run their own lands the way they wished. Perhaps that was what set America apart from other nations? That he was willing to give his states as much freedom and independence as possible, as long as they adhered to essential rules as outlined in the Constitution. In a way, the states were essentially their own countries, each with a unique culture and government system which the states had almost total control over...sort of. There were a lot of factors at play which prevented the states from being fully in charge. It was the same reason why nations were not the rulers of their own lands and had to answer to human bosses.

Actually, in some instances, it was amazing that the humans listened to personifications, at all. Technically speaking, many of the states, themselves, wouldn't have nearly as many rights as they currently possessed had they been human citizens.

Delaware tried not to think about it too much.

"This is boring," Pennsylvania moaned from her place on a nearby couch.

Delaware refrained from pointing out that Pennsylvania hadn't done any of the paperwork that Delaware was so focused on.

"Tina, I'm bored!" Pennsylvania repeated.

"Hmm," was all Delaware could think to respond.

"Everyone gets to go and do things. They all have battles and missions and all that. And what do we do? Sit around like good girls and finish the paperwork."

"Uhhmm."

"Now, you know I'm normally very restrained and don't like to interfere with things."

Delaware raised a delicate eyebrow but said nothing.

"But I wish Vater had taken me with him on his secret mission. I could've been an invaluable military asset. But, no, I have to crunch the numbers and other lame, boring things. And it's not fair! I was the one most in favor of this war since the beginning and my people are some of the biggest contributors to the war effort. But I don't get to see any of the action! Even you got to kick some British backside, and you're...well, you."

Delaware turned and stared flatly at her sister. While the two did not consider each other rivals, exactly, there was a strong difference between the attitudes of the eldest two Jones sisters. Delaware's
unwillingness to agree to the war when she considered the nation unprepared for such a conflict was one such point of contention. Not that Delaware was any shrinking violet in the war; as Pennsylvania said, she had rebuffed an attack on her shores earlier that year, and one of Delaware's people, a French immigrant named "Éleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours," had found a way to manufacture gunpowder after it became nearly impossible for the United States to import it and was currently one of the biggest suppliers to the U.S. military (the other suppliers usually being smugglers).

Pennsylvania wasn't a foolhardy state. She was not the type to go charging into a fight without a strong belief that she was able to emerge as the victor and about twenty contingency plans should things somehow go pear-shaped. At the same time, however, Pennsylvania enjoyed playing the role of a military mastermind, to try her hand at cutting down her enemies, taking what they loved most, and leaving the 'losers' to wallow in their own misery while she stood by and laughed. It wasn't the most Christian attitude, and the Quakers at her place were often unnerved by their state's rabid thirst for bloodshed.

Delaware just wished her sister wasn't so…loud about it.

"Ah, we've got a letter," Delaware spoke up, breaking the uncomfortable atmosphere.

The letter was addressed to their father, but, seeing as Delaware was in charge while he was away, she was permitted to open and read communications meant for him. The quiet and unassuming 'First' state scanned the message, eyes widening a fraction as she saw that it was from none other than England, himself.

He certainly had some neat handwriting.

"What is that?" Pennsylvania asked. "Let me see!"

Delaware ducked out of the way of Pennsylvania's aggressive swipe for the letter. She dodged another attack and lightly kicked Pennsylvania in the shin to knock her to the ground. Once she had done so, she sat down on top of her younger sister to keep her from making another attempt on the letter.

"No fair!" Pennsylvania shouted. "You cheated! I demand a rematch!"

Delaware ignored her and began to read the letter more fully.

It seemed that England wanted to negotiate peace terms. Laughable, insulting, and presumptuous peace terms which demanded outrageous compensation that no sane American would even consider paying. But, still, peace terms. Despite her initial antipathy to the war, Delaware was very tempted to simply crumple the letter up and pitch it into the fireplace. However, the dignity of her position required a level of maturity and, so, she was honor-bound to report this to President Madison.

Not that she believed for even a moment that he would accept the terms. Madison was now deeply invested in the war. From what Delaware knew of the man, he was generally the type to hem and haw over the details of something and hesitate to commit to anything, but once he did then he would fight tooth-and-nail to enforce it.

In other words, Madison would more than likely tell England to "fuck off" – though in polite and respectable language, as he was a gentleman.

"I don't think we'll be having Christmas as a family, this year," Delaware said to Pennsylvania. "You said you want more action; I think I can sort something out."
New York was in his cabin writing down the information he had collected and what he had heard reported back to him from Vermont and New Hampshire.

Their fears were confirmed. England had come to join the fight, in person.

From what New York had gathered, England had arrived in Canada to assemble a party to escort him to Washington D.C. for peace negotiations he assumed were in the works following some letter he had sent. Canada informed him that they hadn't received any word that the Americans intended to stop fighting and that, only a few days after England's letter was supposed to have arrived, the Americans incited a number of skirmishes and even went on to tell him about the earlier American victories in the northwest. England had, apparently, flown into a rage and began berating anyone and everyone he could think of.

He screamed at Major-General Proctor for being an idiot, he accused their Native allies of treachery, he railed against America for not knowing when to back down, and he even chewed out Canada for not doing better with the 'generous' supply of troops England had provided to him when England needed every man he could get to help him finally crush France.

It did not surprise New York at all when saw that New Hampshire had included a mention of the fact that England really did look a great deal like that traitor Connecticut.

The entire war, they hadn't heard so much as a peep from the Nutmeg state and it had really chafed at New York, who was getting a good deal of heavy fire due to his proximity to the Canadian border. Only the day before, New York and his troops had been forced to abandon Fort Niagara as the British overran it.

A number of Dutch swearwords escaped New York's lips as he brooded in the small shelter that served as his new office.

"That damned matennaier," he muttered.

That's when he heard it. The screaming. Pure, raw, and filled with terror. New York darted to the window and saw those hated red uniforms appearing in the distance as the good people of Lewiston were forced to take flight from their assailants. Rage boiled in New York's blood as he saw the British troops open fire on unarmed men, women, and children.

It seemed the British and Canadians were not above brutalizing non-combatants any more than Tecumseh's men had been.

New York had standing orders from his government and military command. He was not to be captured under any circumstances. If given the option between capture and retreat, he was to always retreat. New York quickly pitched his documents into the fireplace so that they wouldn't fall into enemy hands and bolted out the door as a hail of gunfire opened upon the town.

Almost instantly, New York took a bullet to his ankle.

"Ack! Godverdomme!" he screamed. "Fucking teringlijer! Sons of hoeren!"

His delightfully crass words were, perhaps, what drew the attackers' attention as they began firing in earnest in his direction. New York, however, was not willing to be taken down by anyone… certainly not Brits and absolutely never, under any circumstances by Canadians.
New York hustled out of the line of fire as quickly as he could with his injury. As he followed after the panicking civilians, seeing the British-Canadian forces closing in on them, he saw two figures at the head of the onslaught. The sour-faced man with humongous eyebrows had to be England, but the second figure almost looked like…

"Pa?" New York said quietly as his gaze narrowed.

No, it wasn't his father. The man looked a good deal younger than America and there were a few other small but discernible differences. That must be Canada, then.

England shouted an order for his troops to burn the town and round up the civilians. New York really took off running, at that, trying not to scream as the pain in his bleeding ankle worsened. He bit into his lower lip so hard that it, too, began to well with drops of red. He wasn't moving fast enough, the enemy was closing in on him and his people.

He collapsed to the ground as the pain became too much. As he tried to rally and get back to his feet, he saw the tip of a bayonet and raised his head to glare hatefully at the face of his uncle.

"You won't be harmed if you give up, eh," the man said.

New York snarled in response. It would be better if Canada shot him. He would assume New York was just a human casualty and would leave his body behind. He could not get taken prisoner.

"Shoot me now, then," he spat. "I am an American and I will die before I surrender to a fucking varkensneuker like you."

New York wasn't sure whether or not Canada understood Dutch, but he could tell that the northern colony knew he'd just been insulted. He raised the musket, but there was no loud bang. Instead, the sound of loud whoops and cries resonated through the town as dark shapes descended. For a moment, New York thought that the Brits' Native allies had come to make a short, bloody work of the rest of the people of Lewiston, only for that fear to dissolve as a familiar face emerged and drove a tomahawk into Canada's shoulder as he turned to face her.

The scarred face of Tuscarora sneered at her little brother as he fell to the ground. She then reached down and hoisted New York unto his feet, had him sling an arm over her shoulder to support him, and began to walk him away from the retaliatory attack her people unleashed upon the British.

"Auntie," New York said. "Not that I ain't grateful, but what are you doing here?"

"I saw the British forces moving on from Fort Niagara and this town was directly in their path," she explained. "I saw the looks on their faces. I could not stand by and see another Neoheroka."

The siege of Fort Neoheroka in the early seventeen-hundreds was one of Tuscarora's bitterest memories. It had been where she'd lost the last threads of the empire she had sought to build and where she'd nearly met her end as a personification as hundreds of Tuscarora men, women, and children were burned alive by the British and their Native allies. In her eyes, anyone who supported foreign rule in North America was the real enemy of peace in their lands…anyone who acknowledged the English king as their sovereign was a foreign invader or a traitor.

"You need to go, my boy," Tuscarora said to New York. "There! There are your men, they'll escort you the rest of the way. My people and I will buy you some time to escape."

"Auntie," New York said softly as she brought him to his relieved troops. "Thank you."

"That's what family is for, boy."
Tuscarora bid a hasty farewell to her nephew as his men put him on horseback with one of the officers to make sure he didn't fall off in his condition. She gave a sad, crinkled smile as the state and the people of Lewiston fled into the night. She then turned, her expression grim and resolute as her warriors fell into formation, and gave a deafening war-cry.

Her eyes blazed with light as she stared into the faces of her opponents. She became fixated on the face of England. The man who had laid her people low and forced her to crawl on hands and knees to beg for her sister Oneida's compassion.

It was an indignity which a woman as proud as Tuscarora could not forgive.

The shouts of the warriors and the shots of the muskets rang through the night as New York's men hurried him off to a new base of operations. With any luck, they would find a safe haven in the town of Buffalo.

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**December 31st, 1813**

Alfred was resting alone in his bed, watching snow fall outside his window.

It was too cold and he shivered under his blankets, wishing for the warm presence of his wife beside him. He didn't like being by himself and would only remove himself from the company of others if he felt it was necessary or that he wasn't wanted. He had been pushing himself so hard lately that Harrison had ordered him to go home and rest for a while.

He'd gone to the New York City house. It was in a safe location and there were enough people living in the bustling port that he did not feel as worried about an attack. Still, it was lonely there, all by himself. New York wasn't residing in the city house, at the time, and the rest of the family was off doing whatever they needed to. That was why Alfred chose the place, as he didn't want to burden the rest of his family while he was on a forced leave of absence.

*It's not right*, he thought to himself. *I am the father. I should be the one out there straightening this mess out. Louise and the children should be safe at home, never having to worry about wars and violence and isolation.*

Not for the first time, Alfred wondered if he was making things worse than they already were. He couldn't get Tecumseh's words out of his head. The accusation against Alfred was heavy, that he had abandoned and betrayed his people and their cultures in favor of the whites, and it left Alfred desperately struggling to rationalize and justify his actions. Only, every time he thought about it, he was left with a question he wasn't sure how to answer.

*Am I the hero or the villain?*

Since he was a boy, Alfred had wanted to be a hero. Someone who garnered admiration and respect. A person who looked after others before himself and fought against all odds for what was right. He wanted to be like Gitchi Odjig, Hiawatha, Glooskap, and Ioskeha. But now, knowing what he did, Alfred was left with a very bitter taste in his mouth and a dark, creeping sensation in his very soul.

Alfred was pulled from his morbid thoughts by a rapid pounding on the front door. Throwing back the covers and reaching for the bedside candle, Alfred made his way downstairs, wondering who on earth could be visiting at that hour of the night and with no one knowing he was there. He was, therefore, astonished to find, upon opening the door, three small, shivering figures.
New Hampshire had gashes and bruises to her face, Vermont was coughing and sniffling and looked even paler than normal, and New York…New York was singed and covered in soot, as if he'd been set on fire.

"What the hell happened to you?!" Alfred exclaimed.

"It seems England and Canada decided to take their anger out on Buffalo," New York said, pinching a strand of hair that had reignited to snuff the flame.

"Could we, maybe, I dunno, come inside before we discuss this furthah?" added New Hampshire.

Alfred moved out of the way and slammed the door shut once his children were safely inside. He then ran to the cupboard where he kept medical supplies – which he always had on-hand, as both he and his children were quite accident-prone – and began to treat their injuries to the best of his ability.

"I'm so sorry this happened, kids," Alfred said as he wound a strand of gauze around a nasty slice in New Hampshire's arm.

"It's not your fault, Fathah," New Hampshire said. "You didn't ask fuh it to happen."

"But it's my fault you guys were caught up in all this. I just wish I could make it stop."

"Not if it means accepting England's 'peace terms,' you don't," said New York. "While you were in the northwest, that limey lobsterback sent you a letter, strongly suggesting that you consider his terms."

"What were the terms?"

"I'm too nice a person to repeat them."

Alfred stared for a moment and then finished bandaging New Hampshire's arm. After making sure the children were cleaned up and given something to eat, Alfred sent everyone to bed and made sure he had his musket in a ready spot should he need to use it for any reason. So much for taking things easy.

He was just barely able to begin drifting off when the door to his room creaked open a hair and Vermont poked his head in.

"Papa, can I sleep in here with you, tonigh'?" he said quietly.

Alfred saw the nervous expression on the boy's face, smiled reassuringly at him, and nodded. Vermont raced into the room, dove onto the bed, and immediately hogged the blankets. Alfred just continued to smile and leaned back against the pillows. Not a minute later, New Hampshire appeared at the door; she was red-faced in embarrassment at having to ask and drew the request out as long as she could, but she, too, asked to sleep next to her father because she wasn't comfortable being alone. Alfred waved her over and she gently nudged Vermont to make room so she could get in.

Alfred put his head back down only to see New York standing in the doorway. New York didn't even wait to be acknowledged and said absolutely nothing as he moved forward and shoved himself into the bed on his father's other side. The children were all asleep within moments, nestled up against their father. Alfred felt warmer and more at peace than he had in a long time.

Morning would find Alfred and the three states still cuddled up and clinging to each other to stave off the cold and the darkness of the New Year.
March 27, 1814

They finally had him.

Red Stick and his fanatical followers were holed up in a village on the Tallapoosa River, near a curve in the river known as "Horseshoe Bend." Louise had hunted them throughout the Mississippi territory and she was determined to bring about a total annihilation of the Red Stick cause, by whatever means necessary. Only two months ago, she had thought the tricky bastard had escaped justice after those indecisive battles at Emuckfaw and Enotachapo. Now, however, as Louise sat patiently in the officers' tent, listening to the old, short-tempered firebrand Major-General Andrew Jackson lay out his plans, she couldn't help but smirk as she envisioned only triumph.

To one side of her were Georgia and Tennessee, both of them tired but still determined. On her other side were her in-laws, Lower Creek, Yuchi, and the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations. When Cherokee and Choctaw had heard about the Creek civil war from Tennessee when she rode all the way to her land to report what was going on in the Deep South, they and hundreds of their warriors enlisted to join the fight on the side of the U. S. military. General Jackson, though pleased to have more troops at his disposal, did not look pleased to have the tribes, themselves, present for the battle planning. Jackson had some fine qualities, but an ability to be polite to Natives was not notable in his repertoire.

"Their forces and fortifications are impressive, I will give them that much," Jackson said. "I propose an encirclement. General Coffee, you will take the mounted gunmen and the Cherokee Regiment and cross the river and surround the enemy whilst the rest of us lead the Tennessee militia and the Thirty-Ninth Infantry in a direct assault to draw their fire. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," replied Brigadier General John Coffee. He saluted and left to gather his men.

The rest of the officers saluted, as well, and left for their positions. Jackson tried to dissuade the ladies from participating in the battle, as he had at every single other engagement with the Red Sticks, but the female personifications insisted that it was vital for them to be witness to the events. Personifications might not have much power in influencing major events or decisions in government, but they had an unquestionable power of persuasion when it came to being present for those events, especially if their own people were involved (as was the case, now, with Tennessee's militia volunteering to go out and fight, despite little to no pay and hellish camp conditions). The only one who wouldn't be going into battle was little Louisiana, whom Louise gave into the hands of an elderly slave-woman one of the officers had brought to the camp to serve as a maid-of-all-work – the old woman smiled kindly at Louise and promised her that she could trust her to look after the child.

It felt unseasonably hot for March, even if it was in the untamed heart of the south, as the troops readied themselves to charge into battle.

Louise and her two stepdaughters looked imposing on the backs of their horses. Both the little girls had proven to be excellent horsewomen and could shoot effectively from horseback. The girls wore child-sized versions of Louise's blue, military uniform; and, like her, their uniforms included shin-length skirts over trousers so as to provide a modicum of dignity for ladies of their station.

With muskets at the ready, their bayonet tips glinting dangerously in the morning light, the combined forces of Tennessee militiamen and the warriors of the Lower Creek, Choctaw, and Cherokee tribes prepared to advance on the Red Sticks and finally bring them to heel.
They had the enemy surrounded on all sides, cut-off from any means of escape.

But the Red Sticks refused to surrender.

Hundreds of enemy warriors lay dead or dying on the field. Thankfully, civilians had been spared, as Jackson had allowed the Red Sticks to send their women, children, and elderly upstream to be kept out of the violence of the battle. No such mercy was granted to the warriors, however, as Coffee's men opened fire on the men who tried to escape into the river while Cherokee and his people set the village on fire. The body-count for the Red Sticks had long since passed five hundred.

Darkness was soon upon them all after six hours of fighting. Red Stick, himself, had taken about twenty bullets, but he wasn't dead. Of his original force of one thousand warriors, only two hundred remained by the end – and, even then, his men had to literally drag him away from the battle. Chief Menawa was found lying amongst the dead bodies; however, hours later, when men returned to bury the bodies, he was nowhere to be found.

Louise stood upon the barren waste that had once been the Red Stick town and crowed in triumph as she watched the few enemy warriors scatter. The strength of the Red Sticks had been decisively cut off, but the leaders and the tribe, himself, would likely seek allies elsewhere.

"Zis is not over," said Louise. "Not until every one of zem is dead."

Lower Creek stood beside her and turned a wary gaze on her sister-in-law. While she had long ago become used to the way of things, the importance of destroying an enemy completely so he could never threaten you or your people again, Red Stick was still her brother.

"Then, let me finish it," she said, drawing Louise's gaze. "He is my brother and my responsibility."

"But 'e is still free. I swore to see zis fight to its conclusion."

"Only to end the threat in these parts. If I know Chekilli, he will head further south into the Florida region where the British and Spanish will be happy to give him support. I can stop him. I will continue on with General Jackson and we will bring him down. You...you need to be with your family, with Little St-with Alfred," she corrected herself, almost saying her baby brother's old human name. "Go to him. Watch over him. He shouldn't be alone at times such as these."

Louise nodded and left to gather the girls so they could prepare to head for home.

Lower Creek watched her go and a sense of resolution overcame her. Upper Creek – no, Red Stick, she reminded herself sharply – was too dangerous to let live. He did not care whom he hurt with his actions and he was willing to kill Lower Creek, herself, to achieve his goals. Goals which now seemed hollow and stupid, especially since his friends in the northwest had been beaten into submission. There would be dire repercussions, of that she was certain. There was no way for this to end without a final confrontation.

When all was said and done, there would be only one Creek tribe.

She hated what she would have to do. She remembered all the times Mother had wept from a broken heart whenever her children killed each other. It had been happening long before the white man ever showed up and Lower Creek doubted the tribes would ever fully make peace with each other – there were too many millennia of emotional baggage for them to just smile and hug and pretend they'd never done anything wrong to each other.
Lower Creek had always been a realist. Hatred and wickedness did not start with one race or culture; they were things which transcended all barriers and no one was ever fully exempted from them. Human nature would always be a constant, even among non-humans like the personifications.

July 22nd, 1814

"A treaty of peace and friendship."

That is what it would be called as Alfred sat in a stuffy meeting hall in Greenville, Ohio. Considering how well the last treaty he'd signed with his siblings in that town had gone, Alfred had his doubts that this one would make things any better.

Still, he watched closely and waited to be called up to sign the agreement. He stole occasional glimpses of his siblings, who were standing on the other side of the hall. Wyandot, Lenape, Shawnee, Seneca, Miami, Potawatomi, Odawa, and Kickapoo. They had all allied with England at one time or another, though Miami had come through and joined in Alfred's fight on his side, only for his people to be punished by attacks from the other tribes and even American troops who accused Miami of betrayal.

Potawatomi did not look much better than she had the last time Alfred had seen her. The lingering air of madness was still hovering over her, spurred on by brutal slaughters of her people at Peoria Lake; inflicted by the Illinois Rangers of Edwardsville as vengeance for Fort Dearborn – Alfred hated what had happened, especially when he learned that the Native victims had included the daughter and grandchild of Black Partridge, the man who had helped Alfred and many others escape to freedom. The man, himself, was there and Alfred couldn't even bear to look him in the eye after what had happened.

"And, now, will the signatories please rise?"

Alfred stood and approached the table on which the treaty was laid. He withdrew a pen from the inkpot and glanced up to see the myriad of emotions playing across the faces of his brothers and sisters. Miami gave him a sad smile. Seneca and Lenape just looked solemn and resigned. Kickapoo, Wyandot, and Odawa were glaring and almost looked as if steam were escaping from their heads. Potawatomi had an expression of child-like confusion. And Shawnee...well, the only thing keeping Shawnee from ripping up the treaty and pulling her knife on everyone was the fact that Tuscarora, who had joined the conference as an 'intermediary,' had a gun aimed at her back.

Regardless, as everyone signed their names to the document, Alfred detected that their anger was not entirely directed at him. By this point, the tribes present that day had realized how little their lives and efforts were valued by the British, who merely regarded them as tools to fight the war for them. While the tribes had been so often at-odds with the whites and their government, it had become painfully apparent that they would hardly be treated any better by the British and Canadians.

In this case, it seemed, they considered Alfred to be the lesser of two evils.

The treaty, itself, was very simple and straightforward.

Article I: All the participating tribes agreed to peace with the United States.

Article II: All of the aforementioned tribes will agree to give aid to the United States in the war with Great Britain and all allies thereof.
Article III: The tribes must acknowledge themselves under the protection of the United States and no other power.

Article IV: The United States vows to respect the territorial borders of all signatory tribes as they were established before the war, so long as all other conditions are met.

Alfred was the first to sign. As he did so, he felt an odd pain inside of him. As if pieces of him were being cut out and stitched back in, only in the wrong places. As the tribes signed their own names, they were similarly overcome by something. They almost appeared to fade in and out, as if they were not fully there, anymore.

In all the treaties Alfred had signed with his siblings, nothing quite like that had ever happened. He had a terrible feeling that it was a bad omen of things to come.

Early August, 1814

Things were looking considerably brighter than before.

Peace talks were about to be under way. Already, the American emissaries were headed for the city of Ghent to begin the negotiations with Britain on neutral ground. Word had reached home that the American forces had also defended Fort Erie in a long but decisive engagement on the Niagara front. Alfred felt as if the weight of the war was finally starting to lift from his shoulders.

The Creek War was finally over, as well. Alfred's sister had written to them to let the family know that Red Stick was gone. Permanently. His leader, William Weatherford, had surrendered to Andrew Jackson after a few months of an attempted resurgence and Alfred's sister, the lone Creek tribe, had absorbed the remnants of Red Stick's people into her numbers – or else they joined with other tribes who would give them shelter, such as Seminole.

Everything appeared secure in the homeland.

And, yet, Alfred couldn't help but feel that the danger was still lurking. The war was not over, even if peace was now within sight. Some raids and naval conflicts were still being conducted. Nothing too major, as of yet, but Alfred was unnerved by reports of enemy ships being sighted not too far from the shores of Maryland.

He could only hope and pray that the threat would come to nothing.

August 24th, 1814

Alfred's eyes watered and his lungs constricted from the smoke as he stumbled from the burning building.

*Is this what it was like for Canada when I attacked him?* Alfred thought to himself.

Earlier that day, the British and Canadian forces landed and laid waste to the American forces at Bladensburg. President Madison had been compelled to flee and sent urgent word to his wife Dolley and to the Jones family of the immediate threat to their safety and urged them, in the strongest possible terms, to flee the city of Washington. The First Lady had assembled the White House staff
and frantically had them load as much as they could of value into the carts, even ordering one of the Madison family's slaves to rescue a beloved painting of President Washington from its frame so that it wouldn't be destroyed by the invaders.

As Mrs. Madison and her household made their departure, Alfred and his family were determined to stay and do what they could to defend the capital.

It wasn't many of them there. Alfred, Louise, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and little Louisiana. The others had spread out to other corners or had been at Bladensburg and fled with the president.

Alfred screamed and clutched his chest as it felt as though his heart was literally on fire, burning a hole in his chest. As he looked into the distance, he saw the Capitol building going up in flames. His precious Capitol. Seat of governance in his land and home to the library of Congress. All of it being brought low by a blaze of fire.

"Alfred, mon amour," Louise said, trying to help him up. Little Louisiana, who was, by now, able to walk on her own, clung tearfully at her mother's skirt. "Please, you must rise. We need to go."

"It hurts," Alfred replied through teeth clenched in pain. "It hurts so much."

"Daddy!" Maryland's voice shrieked.

Alfred couldn't help but look up and his pain only magnified. Maryland's dress had caught fire and horrible blisters littered her skin as flesh burned. Louise darted over and helped her stamp out the fire, but the girl still seemed to be burning.

"Where are ze others?" Louise asked worriedly.

"We're here!" Delaware called out as she and Pennsylvania came into view, dragging a barely conscious Virginia with them. Virginia was in no better shape than Maryland, but was trying to restrain her cries of anguish, though pained sobs escaped her lips.

"Rest here, ma petites," said Louise. "We cannot escape on foot. I will go fetch a wagon."

She ran in the direction of the carriage house. Alfred could see ranks of red uniforms marching closer and closer.

"Hurry!" Maryland screamed. "More are coming!"

Louise managed to arrive with a small wagon. Pennsylvania and Delaware helped her load their father and sisters into the back just in time to make a dash for it. As the wagon rumbled away, Alfred, Maryland, and Virginia opened their eyes and stared through the haze of agony at the figures leading the second wave of red-coated troops.

England and Canada.

"Burn it to the ground!" England ordered as his men came in range of the already-burning White House. "I don't want a single block of stone standing by the time you're done!"

For the first time since his Revolution, Alfred honestly, sincerely hated the nation who had raised him and the brother who abandoned him. All thoughts of anything he had done to Canada during this war vanished as he silently cursed them for what they were doing to him and to his daughters. The blaze that consumed the White House seemed to echo in Alfred's heart as he began to scream once again.
The entire family was covered in ashes and soot as Louise pulled the wagon in at the inn of a kindly Quaker family who lived just outside of the city. There was no way the Joneses could continue on to Brookeville, where the president was taking up temporary residence until the attack was over, until Alfred and the girls were no longer hurting.

The innkeeper and his wife seemed to recognize what Alfred and his family were and immediately escorted the father and daughters to bed where they could rest through their ordeal. As the day wore on, however, they showed no signs of improving and, if anything, seemed to worsen as the fires in D.C. lashed at the three from the inside out.

Finally, it reached the point where Louise couldn't stand watching them suffer and hearing them scream any longer.

"My girls," Louise said to Pennsylvania and Delaware. "If I told you zat I believe I know a way to stop zis, would you trust me? No matter what it might involve?"

Pennsylvania and Delaware shared a brief glance, but nodded.

"As long as no innocent humans are killed," Delaware said firmly.

"What do you need of us, Mutter?" Pennsylvania added.

"All right," said Louise. "I need two live chickens, a plain white dress, a white cloth long enough to wrap around my head, cornmeal, a bottle of rum, a knife, some clean bowls, a Bible, and candles."

The girls shared another glance, this one confused and wary, but hurried to fetch the items their stepmother requested.

Louise requisitioned the basement of the inn, telling the innkeeper that she and her daughters wished to pray in a quiet, secluded place where they were not to be disturbed. The man saw no problem with it and said that he and his own family intended to offer prayers for the deliverance of D.C. from the British.

Pennsylvania and Delaware returned soon after with the items and Louise began to prepare the space in the basement. She cleared away some boxes and crates so there was a large, open area in the center of the room. Next, she undressed and doffed her shoes and changed into the plain, white gown and bound her black curls in the cloth.

She set the bowls down and filled one with water. After that, she began to chant in a strange language as she sprinkled the cornmeal around her in a circle and then into odd shapes around the circle's edge. She lit one of the candles and placed it in the center.

"No matter what 'appens," Louise said to the girls. "Do not leave zis room or make any noise. Keep zat Bible by you at all times. Oui?"

The girls nodded quietly in acquiescence again.

Louise turned away from them and stamped into the dust on the cellar floor. Then, once again, but with more aggression. She began to stamp her feet in a rhythm as she made a strange dance around the circle. She sang in that odd language again and started to spin as she moved.

Stamp, spin, shuffle. Stamp, spin, shuffle.
One could almost hear a drumbeat emanating through the air from an unknown source. The girls were becoming increasingly afraid, but they followed their stepmother's words and said nothing.

Stamp, spin, shuffle. Stamp, stamp, stamp. Spin. Stamp, stamp, stamp.

Louise stopped and seemed to be staring at something neither of the states could see.

"I am ‘ere to make an offering," she said. She picked up the bottle of rum and poured it into one of the empty bowls. "I bring ze sweet taste of liquor to slake your thirst."

Before the eyes of those present, something caused the rum to drain from the bowl. Next, Louise motioned for the girls to hand her the chickens they were restraining. She took the first chicken by the legs, picked up the knife, and sliced the bird's head clean off. She swung the dead creature's body around her; though, by an unseen power, no blood passed beyond the circle. She dropped the creature at her feet and repeated the process with the second.

Delaware and Pennsylvania, having finished their role by passing off the chickens, now both clutched at the Bible Louise had left for them and stayed tucked behind a stack of crates.

"I offer you blood and flesh," Louise said. "To appease your 'unger."

There was a horrible crunching sound and neither of the states could bring themselves to look.

"I ask only for what will bring balance and 'armony back to my famille. Ze boon I ask is to match violence at ze 'ands of men with ze violence created by nature."

She picked up the bowl filled with water and began to pour it over the candle.

"Let a punishment for ze crime committed against us be met by ze wrath of powers beyond any mortal's control. Let ze flame meet 'is enemy in water and wind. And let ze 'eavens pour out zeir fury on zose who would do us 'arm."

The room began to rattle and shake.

"Bring us justice! Bring us vengeance! Unleash ze might of your rage against our enemies!"

She began to sing in that language, once again, and a peal of thunder was heard above. The shaking seemed to reach to all the corners of the house. Wind howled outside like a great and terrible beast had been set loose from the pits of Hell, itself. The walls of the cellar leaked with water like streams of tears.

In Washington D.C., a storm had broken out, the likes of which no one had ever seen before. Trees were ripped from their roots and rain slashed like knives against those caught in its path. The wind was so strong it lifted the British cannons into the air and sent them flying.

England and Canada gasped hold of the pillars at the front of the structure they had just attempted to destroy. Soon, however, they felt their grips beginning to loosen as the wind almost seemed to be attempting to tear them away and sweep them off into its depths.

As Canada glanced through the tempest, he saw the winds had combined into a single, terrifying mass. A swirling, howling column of dark air that ripped a path through the streets towards them with vicious intent. Canada swore that he saw dark eyes and a malevolent grin within that awful
force, but any chance to ponder it was snatched away as he and England found themselves yanked violently into the air and hurled into the distance, as if thrown by the hand of a giant. They would later be found by their men, badly injured and several miles from the city.

The storm's horror far exceeded anything either British or Canadians had ever witnessed before and the destruction and death that followed in its wake appeared, in their eyes, far worse than what they had inflicted on the city. The storm attacked everyone and everything without discrimination. It damaged American buildings and British ships. It killed British troops and American civilians alike.

The Americans called it the wrath of God, a show of divine justice to save their capital and drive out the British. The price of their own lives, they felt, was a small one and merely collateral damage in order to retake possession of their home.

Later, after the storm had abated, the three Jones women stood upon the crest of a hill and looked out on what they had wrought. And Pennsylvania found herself remembering the words of the prophet Isaiah, and couldn't help but say them aloud: "Thou shalt be visited of the LORD of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire."

September 14th, 1814

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Pennsylvania said.

"Definitely," Maryland chirped back. The girl was still heavily-bandaged under layers of gauze and her long, black hair had been mostly burnt off or else cut so that her burns could be treated. Still, she was up and moving about, despite the remnants of pain she was undoubtedly feeling.

There was no way in hell Pennsylvania was going to let her go into battle with the British alone in such a condition. It had absolutely nothing to do with Pennsylvania's rabid bloodlust and hunger for military combat. Nothing, at all.

The two girls had taken up at Fort McHenry where the British fleet was attempting a siege. Further north, New York and some of the other states were defending Plattsburgh from another attack; and, in the south, American forces were defending the city of Mobile from yet another British invasion. There was something about Baltimore, though, that made Pennsylvania and Maryland feel strong and assured.

It was where the first blood of the war had been drawn. Now, it was time for the war to be brought to an end.

Maryland and Pennsylvania smiled at each other as they attached the massive U.S. flag to its hooks and began to hoist it up the flagpole. It was the largest flag the girls had ever seen; handmade by a local flag-maker, Mary Pickersgill, and her thirteen-year-old daughter, the 30ft x 42ft flag was meant as a replacement for the old, weather-worn flag that had previously flown above the fort.

As the girls raised it higher and higher, they could hear the mocking sounds of the British troops encamped a short way off. The men fired rounds into the sky and jeered at the Americans occupying the fort. As if that was supposed to intimidate them.

"Come on, Schwester," Pennsylvania said, slinging an arm around Maryland's shoulders once they'd finished their task. "Let's make these British rue the day they ever set foot on American soil."
The girls laughed and began to sing an old song from the Revolution which their father had taught them.

"Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all,

By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall;

In so righteous a cause let us hope to succeed,

For heaven approves of each generous deed."

The battle raged long and hard.

Congreve rockets and mortar shells pounded against the stronghold of Fort McHenry. Alexander Cochrane ordered his troops to land west of the fort in order to launch a raiding party that could more easily slip past the defenses than a frontal assault, but it only bought him maybe half-an-hour of distraction before the Americans cut them down and ran them off. Through the darkness and smoke and the red flashes of the rockets, the American flag continued to wave on through the night and into the breaking of the dawn, never to be torn down by the hands of the British.

From the deck of a British truce ship that sat bobbing in the harbor, a young lawyer by the name of "Francis Scott Key" stood watching the proceedings. He had been sent to negotiate the release of a prisoner, but was forced to remain on the ship until the battle was over.

As he stood there, Key's eyes became riveted to the flag of his nation proudly remaining as strong and steadfast as the soldiers who defended it, and his thoughts became consumed by it as he muttered a verse that sprung into his mind.

"O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,

What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,

Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,

O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?"

The words seemed to stretch across time, space, and air. It reached miles away to where a wounded nation lay sleeping in his bed and reassured him that, so long as men and women were willing to fight for their freedom and stand fast against all odds, he would never fall.

December 15th, 1814

Massachusetts had finally found Rhode Island.

The little vagabond had showed up off the New England coastline, hauling a ton of cargo he'd stolen from British ships and looking extremely pleased with himself. His sneaky and underhanded nature was as unquenchable as ever, it seemed. The half-pint had even gone and gotten his ear pierced and a gold ring inserted into it.

"What am I gonna do with you?" Massachusetts said tiredly, ruffling his younger brother's reddish-
brown locks.

"What'chu mean?" Rhode Island snapped. "No one can do nothin' with me. I am Rogue's Island, y'know."

Massachusetts shook his head at his brother's old nickname. Once upon a time, it had been regarded as an insult directed at Rhode Island's inability to keep order and the constant overthrowing of any authorities who dared try to rein in all the shifty activity going on there.

"C'mon, let's get inside and have something to eat, it's freezing," Massachusetts said, ushering his brother into the house and dusting the snow off his jacket.

The two boys finished preparing a warm stew and toasting some slightly stale bread when there was a knock on the door of the kitchen house. Times being what they were and fire hazards still a constant threat, Massachusetts's kitchen was in a small structure separate from the main part of his house. That being said, it was extremely odd to have visitors come knocking at the kitchen house. Massachusetts shared a confused look with Rhode Island before cautiously approaching the door and opening it.

There, in the doorway, half-frozen and horribly emaciated, was Connecticut.

"H-help…m-me," he stammered before falling face-first through the entrance.

Massachusetts instinctively caught his older brother and helped move him further inside the building. Massachusetts sat Connecticut down by the fire and sent Rhode Island into the house to fetch some blankets. He then set on a kettle of water to boil and filled a bowl with some of the stew which he proceeded to cautiously feed to the frail Connecticut, taking care not to let his brother get burned by the heat.

"What happened to you?" Massachusetts finally asked as Rhode Island returned and draped a woolen blanket around Connecticut's shoulders. Massachusetts filled a small, metal tub with the hot water from the kettle and added a little cool water to balance the temperature and helped Connecticut ease his feet into the tub.

"I c-couldn't take it any-y-y more," Connecticut said, his voice still trembling. "Th-they're ins-s-sane."

"Who?"

"The F-Federalist Party. I j-just got away from them."

"Yeah, we know they've been making some trouble ovah here," said Massachusetts. "I even heard they was having some kind of convention thing today."

"Th-the Hartford Convention. Members from y-your states, m-mine, everywhere in N-New England. Th-they wanted to s-secede from the Union."

"Because of the whole issue with the lobstahback? But, why are you like…well, honestly, you look like you've got both feet in the grave."

"They wouldn't l-let me go. I w-wanted to help my family, but they kept me locked up."

"How could humans get control of you? You should be strongah than them."

"Not after the blockades, I'm not." The tremor was finally starting to leave his voice. "My strength
comes from shipping and trade, much like the two of you. But my government kept me so closed off, I couldn't do anything to make up for that loss when England started blocking off my merchant ships."

"You weren't tryin' to abandon us, then?" said Rhode Island, sharing a guilty look with Massachusetts. The two of them had been condemning their brother a bit harshly in the past two years. Most of the states had.

"Believe me, I didn't want this war and I stand by my protest of it. I needed trade with Europe to keep my economy going. The only reason I haven't completely starved from lack of commerce is because I sold supplies to the army. Yes, I know it was profiteering, but what else could I do? You both have much more skill with smuggling than I do, and I couldn't escape the Federalists to join you both on your raids against British vessels to help make up the difference."

"All right, I get you," Massachusetts said, nodding as he accepted his brother's words. "But, what's going on with that convention?"

"They're hoping to either push through a number of impossible demands in Congress or else to force New England into secession as a protest against the war. New Hampshire's and Vermont's delegates weren't even supposed to be there, as their governors didn't approve of the convention. The only real reason any of them were there, at all, was because they wanted to rebuild their mercantile ventures. You must admit that, even before this war broke out, all of us were suffering from those embargoes and trade bans."

Massachusetts and Rhode Island both had to agree with that. They had been furious with the government forcing those laws on them and preventing them from making their living the only way they could without resorting to smuggling and piracy. Hundreds, even thousands, of New England citizens were starving and unable to find work because trade was impossible thanks to the bans. And they weren't the only ones in peril; with Congress dissolving the national bank and forcing one of the wealthiest regions in the country into poverty, the government was bleeding itself dry. It was nothing short of a miracle that the United States had lasted this long.

Connecticut, now more sufficiently strengthened, went on at length into the details of the convention and the 'secret meetings' he'd been forced to attend. While it was true that the Federalists had some justifiable grievances, what they demanded was completely unrealistic and outrageous.

Unfortunately, nothing short of a full-scale invasion attempt and a victory worthy of legend and songs would put the Federalist cause to rest.

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December 23rd, 1814

If Andrew Jackson ever ran for president, Louise doubted that he would receive anything other than a landslide victory.

Despite his temper, Jackson was a consummate leader. Even in the face of overwhelming odds, he was still able to inspire the bravery and loyalty of his men. Even as they were forced to pull back, Jackson made sure the British knew that they wouldn't have this land unless they pried it from the cold, dead fingers of the United States.

"By the Eternal, they shall not sleep on our soil!" Jackson shouted, slamming his fist on the table for emphasis as he heard the news that the British had established a camp on the plantation of Major
Gabriel Villeré, who had been forced to escape out a window of his home and flee for his life.

The British had landed on the shores of Louisiana that morning. Although the American forces had put up a good resistance, the British were able to achieve a tactical victory. That didn't stop Jackson from launching into plans to drive them out and make them bleed for daring to encroach on American land. Jackson was a man who valued his nation above anything else. It was a belief bred into him from an early age when he and his brother were taken prisoners by the British during the Revolution and were tormented and starved by their captors before their mother secured their release – only for his brother to die from sickness and their mother to later also die from disease after tending to American prisoners on British prison-ships. His hatred for the British in this war didn't even need to be stoked by the words of propagandists, it already burned hot in his veins.

Perhaps that was why Louise liked the irascible Carolinian.

And, as the man described a plan for a surprise strike against the British as they rested in their camp, Louise couldn't help but feel a surge of pride that Alfred had such a man on his side in battle. Heaven help them all had Jackson been on the side of the enemy.

As both American and British officers planned for a future confrontation which would decide the fate of Louisiana, everyone remained unaware that, within the space of twenty-four hours, the emissaries from their respective nations stationed in Ghent would meet to sign a treaty to end the war.

January 7th, 1815

Louise had prayed within the walls of the Ursuline convent many times in her life.

The smell of the incense, the ringing of bells, the faint click of rosary beads, they were all so familiar. However, no prayer service had ever been quite this significant to her. As she knelt beside the nuns at the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, she could only think of how important the coming battle would be for protecting her family and showing her people why it was in their own best interest to be considered part of the United States.

After the prayers were said for the safe deliverance of New Orleans from the hands of the invaders, Louise rose and picked up her infant daughter in her arms. Little Louisiana was dressed in a frilly, white dress with tiny flowers stitched into various sections and white ribbons were woven into her black curls.

"It is time your maman makes good on 'er promise," Louise said to the child, carrying her to the baptismal font.

The Reverend William Dubourg stood at the ready, along with two men who couldn't have been more different from each other. To one side was General Andrew Jackson, looking imposing and stately in his uniform and standing tall and proud as ever. To the other was a roguish man in flamboyant, fancy clothes, with his moustache and beard neatly combed and curled, and a sly, deviously charming smile on his face – this second man was the infamous pirate Jean Lafitte.

Louise had asked the two men to be present for the baptism of her daughter and to stand as the child's godfathers. It didn't matter to her that Jackson wasn't Catholic and it was doubtful that a pirate like Lafitte was devout in any sense. She had chosen them because of their significance in keeping her daughter and her old home safe in the coming conflict. Jackson was leading the official military force and Lafitte was bringing his notorious Baratarian pirates to rain down destruction on the British
fleet. Despite how different they were, the two men were both becoming fast friends as they devised their scheme to utterly annihilate the enemy. As godfathers, they had brought along christening gifts for Louisiana; although not typical gifts for a little girl, Lafitte had bequeathed her a fine broadsword and Jackson an elegant set of pistols for Louise to give the child when she was old enough to use them properly.

Those two were exactly the type of men Louise wanted to look after her child's interests.

Once everything was said and down, Louise kissed her daughter's head and placed her in the arms of Mother Ste. Marie Olivier de Vezin, the prioress of the Ursuline order. Although it pained Louise to be parted from her daughter, she was not so foolish as to bring a child into the heat of battle. The nuns would look after Louisiana as they continued their prayer vigil while Louise and the men were in the field of battle.

Tomorrow would be a great day, a proud and honorable day. It would be a day of victory.

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January 8, 1815

Louise smiled at her brother-in-law as they waited in the foggy marshes of the swamp. Choctaw didn't smile back, but gave a small nod of commiseration. They were waiting for the signal to attack. Choctaw's warriors and the Louisiana Free Men of Color were assigned to fight together while the Kentucky and Tennessee militia units took the front to lull the enemy in closer, forcing their foot soldiers to cross the canal they'd made and drawing their ships into shallow, unnavigable water.

Kentucky and Tennessee, themselves, were both with their people. They hadn't been present for their sister's baptism the day before. Neither was particularly comfortable in a Catholic church as they were largely Protestant states. Still, they'd used the time to offer their own prayers for victory by sitting with some of their soldiers and listening to the military chaplain lead a service in camp.

"Are we ready?" Louise asked.

The sound of heavy artillery fire raining down on the main assault was all the answer needed. The men all gave a rallying cry and charged into the slaughter unfolding. The man-made canal the British had dug out had collapsed, leaving the men to drag their boats through the mud. To top it off, they had forgotten the fascines and ladders needed to cross the canal and scale the earthworks and parapets.

As the British kept trying to pour in and use the power of sheer numbers to their advantage, the Americans continued a brutal barrage of fire that ripped them to shreds. Louise took careful aim and smirked to herself as she fired at a man she recognized as Major-General Sir Edward Pakenham, the well-loved leader of the British force in Louisiana. She only hit him in the shoulder, as he was already injured after a grapeshot hit his horse and shattered his leg. Still, she felt immense satisfaction as yet another grapeshot hit him while his men tried to get him away; this time, the grapeshot hit him in the spine. He would be dead within the hour.

As far as any battles in the war had gone, the Battle of New Orleans was remarkable in its brevity. It had almost been laughably easy, in fact. More and more bodies of British soldiers were piled up, though some were revealed to be live soldiers feigning death due to having lost the will to keep fighting. Those soldiers who escaped and managed to make it onto their ships soon found that any hope of proceeding upriver to launch an attack elsewhere was stifled by the ferocity of Lafitte's privateers and the stronghold of Fort St. Philip guarding the Mississippi River.
The British quickly realized that they had no choice but to withdraw.

_{February 17th, 1815_}

"C'mon, Pa, you need to get up," South Carolina said firmly as she and North Carolina tugged on their father's arms to pull him from bed.

"Please, girls, just let me sleep," Alfred grumbled hoarsely.

"Nope!" North Carolina crowed. "No can do, Pa! You gotta get up and sign some wonderful paperwork!"

"Ugh, kill me, now."

Finally, Alfred grudgingly sat up, slid his feet into his house slippers, and let the Carolinas lead him, each girl holding tightly to either hand. They sat him down at his desk and handed him his papers, ink, and pen. As Alfred looked over what he was meant to be signing, his brows furrowed and then raised.

"Is this...is it really?" he stammered.

"The peace treaty," North Carolina said proudly. "All you need to do is sign it in the appropriate spots and the treaty will be officially ratified. Ain't that great, Pa?!"

"It feels like it's been a century. Now...all I have to do...just sign it and it's over?"

The girls nodded. Alfred picked up the pen and readied himself to sign. And paused. He wasn't sure what was holding him back. He'd wanted this war to end for so long, but, now that the pen was in his hand, he couldn't bring himself to sign and he didn't know why.

"I want to read this thing in full, first," he said. "Any chance you could bring your Pa a cup of coffee?"

"I'll get the kettle goin'," said South Carolina with a frustrated sigh. "Come on, Kitty, let's leave the man to his work."

The girls made their way downstairs, heading for the kitchen, when they happened to notice a figure coming up the road towards the house. Peering out the window, the girls tried to figure out who it could be. At first glance, they thought it looked like Connecticut. However, closer inspection told them the individual was considerably older than their brother. The man stopped at their front door, paced a few steps in obvious nervousness, and then cleared his throat before knocking.

"America," the man said in a distinctive, upper-class English accent. "Lad, it's me. I think we need to talk."

He kept knocking and the Carolinas shared a panicked look.

"It's the limey," North Carolina hissed.

"I can see that," South replied. "Ugly ol' sucker, ain't he? A bug-eyed, beetle-browed basket-case, if ever I saw one."

North Carolina refrained from commenting, considering how much her sister resembled the foreign
nation. Instead, she chose to redirect the conversation.

"What do we do?" she said. "We can't let him anywhere near Pa."

"You go keep Pa distracted. I'll take care of this."

North Carolina darted back up to her father's room, politely asking if he'd signed the treaty, yet, and subtly suggesting he hold off for about five more minutes. South Carolina, meanwhile, had absconded with her father's musket and positioned herself at one of the front windows. As England's knocking became more insistent and his temper started to fire up at being 'ignored,' South Carolina took careful aim at the ground by his feet.

She wasn't going to kill him, however tempting that thought might have been. She was merely going to give him a few warning shots to let him know that his presence was unwanted and that he was risking being shot as a trespasser.

"America!" England called out. "Stop acting so childish! Open this door, right this instant! America!"

Bang!

"Bloody hell! America, stop that, at once!"

Powder, ball, load.

Bang!

"America! We are not at war, any longer!"

Powder, ball, load.

Bang!

"For God's sake, lad!"

Powder, ball, load.

Bang!

Eventually, England seemed to get the message and scarpered, shouting profanities for all and sundry to hear. South Carolina nodded with satisfaction. She had followed her stepmother's orders not to let England or Canada come anywhere near to her father, no matter what means it took to accomplish.

Content that she had done her duty, South Carolina slung the musket over her shoulder and began to whistle the tune of "War and Washington." Granted, the melody was originally from the song "The British Grenadiers," but, in South Carolina's opinion, it sounded better with the American lyrics.

"Did I just hear gunshots?" Alfred said as South Carolina returned to his room with the musket.

"Yes, Pa."

"Why did I just hear gunshots?"

"Rats...big rats...big, ugly rats."

"That speak English?"
"…yes, Pa. Rats that speak English."

Alfred stared down his daughter, who began to sweat under his intense gaze.

"Well, we'd better inform the president!" Alfred announced. "We can't have freaky, mutant rats running around! This could be an epidemic!"

The Carolinas might not have been twins, let alone twins in possession of the supernatural ability to read one another's mind, but the glance they shared with each other might as well have been a psychic link in how it communicated what they thought of their father in that moment.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I warned you there would be some disturbing elements. Please, please, don't scream at me for this. It was incredibly painful for me to write and I was trying to keep everything within the context of the period and the views of the various players.

The Potawatomi really did eat Captain Wells's heart, it was a common thing for a number of tribes to do to brave and respected enemies. So don't give me any whining about me being a racist, because I only write what I read about. Potawatomi, herself, would likely have felt obliged to give the same "courtesy" to her brothers, as a way of showing her respect for them. America healed from the injury more quickly than Miami, but only because he is stronger and more secure as a nation and is drawing on the energy from every single person who called America home whereas Miami is a single tribe.

All the massacres I mention are real events and I included actual details from what happened. Including the pregnant woman who was stabbed to death at Pigeon Roost. The brutality at York and burning of Newark were never meant to happen. The commanding officers had given strict orders to the American troops to cause as little damage as possible, and to leave all civilians and civilian property alone. Unfortunately, a group of soldiers disobeyed orders and triggered a massive spree of plundering and arson. This led to the American forces being forced to retreat from Canada and eventually resulted in the burning of Washington D.C. as revenge.

Whenever we think of secession, we immediately think of the South and the Civil War. However, in the War of 1812, it was New England that was considered most likely to secede.

I'm sure you can tell from my retelling of the Fort Mims Massacre that I am not a fan of Major Daniel Beasley. The man was an utter imbecile who refused to take a dangerous situation seriously and, as far as I'm concerned, carries much of the blame for the slaughter.

"We have met the enemy and they are ours" were the words written by Oliver Perry to William Harrison to inform him of the victory. I just wanted to work them into the dialogue somewhere.

"By the Eternal, they shall not sleep on our soil" was what Andrew Jackson supposedly said when the British arrived in December and started to pitch their camp, hence why he immediately retaliated with an attack to roust them from their beds.
When I initially started reading about the wars with the Native Americans in the early nineteenth century, I have to admit I did get outraged by the sheer number of massacres against unarmed civilians and the violence and hatred which Tecumseh stirred up. It reminded me all too much of what we hear about terrorists. That being said, as I read more about Tecumseh and his life, I can understand why he hated whites so much and what the catalysts were for his uprising. It doesn't mean that murdering women and children was the right thing to do (killing innocents is never justified), but the fact that the Indians were getting sick and tired of being exploited, killed, insulted, and driven off their lands does provide a very strong argument for why they felt violence was their only remaining option.

Unfortunately, Tecumseh's actions would have devastating effects on the future of the Native Americans. Even the tribes which opposed him and allied with the United States.

Also, have I mentioned that I love Dutch swearwords? Most languages only have a few really good swears, but the Dutch are super creative when it comes to insulting people they hate.

Everyone always talks about how the Battle of New Orleans happened after the war was over. But, in fact, the fighting technically started the day before the Treaty of Ghent was signed and the U.S. didn't even ratify the treaty until a month after it was signed – ergo, New Orleans totally counts.
America turned his somber gaze to meet the violet eyes of his twin as Canada rested a comforting hand on his shoulder.

While the two of them had made amends decades ago, they had never really talked in-depth about the War of 1812 because neither one of them was ever sure how to bring it up without causing a lot of pain to the other. America was ashamed of how he'd dragged his brother into the conflict, even if he had never intended for it to happen, and Canada felt guilty for placing blame solely on America when there had been other people pulling the strings.

"I'm sorry," America said quietly.

"You're forgiven," Canada replied with a wry smile. "And…I'm sorry, too, eh."

Ireland started chanting "Hug, hug, hug!" at them, whilst simultaneously aiming punches at England, until the two finally acceded and pulled each other into a hug. England, for his part, simply took the punches – which landed on his shoulder – and stood there looking hollowly at the ground. England had tried for a long time not to think about that war; he'd been preoccupied with France, at the time, and had stifled much of the memory of what he'd done against America and the emotional baggage that went with it. Of course, with it all being aired now, the long-repressed feelings of shame, anger, and sorrow made themselves known. England felt like an utter berk.

"I think there is a more pressing matter we must take note of," Germany spoke up. "America, you mentioned hearing a voice in your head at certain points during the war."

America tensed at that. He had dreaded bringing that point up, as he was afraid the others might think he was crazy and dangerous, but it was an essential part of what happened. Nervously, America nodded.

"And the voice tried to compel you into acts of violence?" said Germany.

"Yes," America replied. He then sighed tiredly. "I suppose you all think I'm crazy, now."

"Nein. In fact, I would be more worried if you hadn't heard it."

America looked up at Germany in confusion. Germany shared a glance with the other nations, who had all become very solemn.

"Most nations experience something like it," he said. "Whenever war, violence, and division threaten to consume a nation, something tries to take hold. It is like…a phantom, lurking in the back of your mind and attempting to control you. Sometimes…sometimes it is successful."
America stared at Germany, who appeared pained just speaking of it. France, Spain, Japan, England, even the Italy brothers were all shifting uncomfortably.

"Have you all really…you know," America stammered.

"Ve~ It is scary," said Italy. "It tells you such horrible things. It once made me think that Germany and Japan weren't my friends and were going to abandon me."

"And I told you not to believe a word of it, Italy," said Germany, his expression softening.

"It tried to make me hate you, Germany. It kept telling me how weak I was and that you were going to hurt me if I didn't...If I didn't..." Italy burst into tears. Romano began swearing as he attempted to comfort his sobbing younger brother whilst glaring at Germany, clearly blaming him for Italy's distress.

"We've all had moments like those," Prussia added. His normal smug smirk was gone and his eyes were lowered. "It always tries to get at us when we're vulnerable. To make us do things no sane person could ever do."

"What…what is it?" said America.

"As far as I can tell…it's hate. As nations, we are affected by our people, ja? We feel agony when major tragedies take place against our citizens. Our health is dependent on our economies. Country unions can be the equivalent of marriages. When we argue and fight with each other, it's because our humans are in conflict. And when our people are consumed by hate…how do you think that will affect us?"

America looked at Prussia and Germany and realized just how significant the subject of the voice was for them. If anyone understood what it was like to be driven to the point of insanity by a hate-filled force beyond their control, it would be them.

"The only way to overcome it," said Germany, "is to not let yourself remain ignorant. The longer you try to dismiss the voice or struggle with it, the more power it gets over you. It takes over your life until, eventually, you are no longer yourself. To break its hold on you, you have to acknowledge the source of the hatred and recognize it as being wrong." 

"And…and everyone goes through it?" America asked. "I'm really not the only one?"

"America-san," said Japan. "We have all had our dark moments. And we have all overcome them, eventually."

America scanned the faces of all the nations present again. Every one of them – hell, even Russia – looked haunted. For so long, America had thought he was the only one who heard those awful things. He had believed that something was broken in him or that he was a bad person despite all his attempts to be a hero. It did not excuse him when he genuinely did make mistakes – and he was willing to admit he'd made a lot of those over the years – but it did prove to him that he was not singularly responsible for every bad thing that happened in his history.

Of course, if all nations experience an evil voice in their minds at one point or another, it left America wondering how much of South's actions had truly been her own.

By the time they all returned to the house, the sun was setting in the distance, casting an orange glow
across the dark waters of the Big Muddy Mississippi. Everything seemed somber, as though a cloud had formed over the group. The lively air of New Orleans had died down considerably since the festivity of Mardi Gras had ended. Now, it was quiet, calm, and still.

BANG!

The nations jumped as the sound of gunfire echoed over their heads.

BANG!

"Sacré bleu!" France exclaimed. "What's going on?! Are we at war?!"

"Ah-ha!" a familiar female voice yelled from above. "I got'cha now! You won't escape me, this time!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Everyone began to panic, except for America, Lithuania, and Russia. Italy and Romano shrieked and ducked for cover, waving white flags, as per usual. France, likewise, took refuge behind a nearby hedgerow. Japan was frantically snapping pictures from a safe distance. England, Germany, and Spain went into defensive mode and took up strategic positions to seek out the attacker. Ireland, Prussia, and Denmark whooped in excitement at the possibility of a fight.

"It sounds like Miss West Virginia is hunting again," said Lithuania.

"What is she hunting in the city?" Russia asked. "More of those vampires?"

"Nah," said America. "Lenna prefers deadlier, more challenging targets."

"Like us? She is hunting man like in The Hounds of Zaroff?"

"Man? Are you kidding? Everything kills man. Man is way down on the hunting list. No, she's going after something that's only rivaled by giant robots."

There was a piercing, blood-curdling screech that shook the entire street. A number of the onlookers pressed their hands to their ears in pain from the sonic vibrations caused by the noise. There was a flurry of activity in the sky as more bullets were fired from the top of Louisiana's house by West Virginia.

"What was that?!" England shouted.

A dark figure landed in front of the nations. It was hard to tell if the thing was black or dark grey, and it was mostly shapeless apart from its large wings. Its eyes were a glowing red that were almost blinding to look at. The creature gave another horrible cry as everyone stared, transfixed, before another round of bullets opened onto the square.

"Gall-darnit!" West Virginia called out. "Don't just stand there, you pack of idgits! Get him!"

America lunged at the creature, tackling it in his superhuman grip. The creature flailed about, trying to dislodge him. Prussia and Denmark both followed him, trying to use their combined strength to subdue the...whatever the hell that thing was. Ireland was cheering them on as the other nations simply continued to watch in stupefied awe. Unseen by everyone else, Canada just rolled his eyes and sighed – if he'd seen his brother battle against a supernatural monster once, he'd seen it a thousand times. Finally, Russia approached with his lead pipe as the Awesome Trio got the creature largely subdued. With one smack, the creature was down and out.
"Whoo, thanks," America said, still restraining the unconscious creature. "Can't tell you guys how much trouble this thing causes us."

"Ve~ Is it safe to come out, now?" said Italy, poking his head out from behind the trash bins where he and Romano had been hiding.

"Yep, it's safe."

Everyone sighed in relief and slowly approached to get a closer look at the thing.

"What the bloody hell is this thing?" said England, leaning close.

Unfortunately, before America could answer, the creature proved it wasn't as defeated as it seemed. Its red eyes shot open, sending England tumbling backwards in surprise and knocking into several of the other nations. America was momentarily distracted enough that the creature was able to free one arm and take a swipe at him. As America instinctively pulled back to protect himself, the creature twisted free, gave one more horrible wail, and then shot up into the dark sky.

"You idgits!" West Virginia said furiously, causing the nations to turn and see her standing in the doorway accompanied by Tony the alien, who was also looking at them in obvious anger. "You complete and utter idgits! I nearly had him! I nearly had Mothman dead to rights and you completely mucked ever'thang up!"

"Fucking shit!" Tony added. "Fucking shit, fucking fuck, fuckers!"

"Exactly, Mr. Tony. We finally coulda brought in one of the biggest dangers to galactic peace, and ya'll ruined it!"

"What's going on?" Germany said. "What was that…that thing?"

"That was ol' Mothman. He's been causin' trouble for us for Lawd-knows how long. He recently left his normal haunt at Point Pleasant and me and Mr. Tony thought we could catch him while he was in unfamiliar turf. That sucker needs to pay for what he's done."

"What has he done?" asked Denmark.

"The collapse of the Silver Bridge, for one. Forty-six people died in that incident. We had to do a whole cover-up on what actually happened. Couldn't let word get out that an alien being caused it, so we fed the media a phony story 'bout an eyebar suspension chain bein' faulty. He's also been terrorizin' locals and visitors, followin' 'em around and threatenin' 'em. And because of ya'll, he's gone and escaped justice once again. So, thanks a lot. That was a real help." She glared at the nations, clearly enraged that her quarry had evaded her because a group of outsiders had bungled it all up.

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it, now," said America. "Let's just go in and have some supper."

"Why do you even have all these folks here, Daddy? I know that one, there, is a decent sort," West Virginia added, pointing out Romano – having recognized him as the man who saved her from the mine collapse long ago. "And Mr. Lithuania's all right in my books. But why, for the love of Honest Abe, do you have all these other people?"

"We are friends and colleagues of your father," Germany explained. "He was explaining important elements of his history to us."
West Virginia shot him an unimpressed look.

"What could my pappy possibly want to talk about with ya'll?" she snapped.

"He was telling us about his relationship with your mother," Denmark said, only to freeze as West Virginia leveled a blazing glare at him.

"What did you just say?" Before Denmark could respond, West Virginia grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him down to eye-level with her. "Let me make somethin' very clear, sweetheart. I ain't got a mother, y'hear? I'm America's daughter and only his. I got nothin' to do with the traitorous South."

"Lenna," America said in a warning tone.

West Virginia released Denmark from her grip. She then turned on her heel and marched back into Louisiana's house, followed by a loudly-swearing Tony who waved what looked like a high-tech blaster at the nations in a faintly threatening manner.

"Sorry about that," America said. "West can be a little temperamental, at times."

"A little?" Prussia said with a snort. "That girl looked two steps from ripping Dane's head off."

"She doesn't like to think about South. West Virginia was born in the middle of the Civil War and really resents South for everything."

"I'll say," said England. "Wouldn't even acknowledge her as her mother."

"Well, truth be told, South wasn't West's mother." At the questioning looks, America cleared his throat awkwardly. "South was the first state since Ohio that didn't have an actual mother. She was born like my kids before South came into my life. I guess it's because of how West was formed. See, she's a southern state, but the rest of the southern states have practically disowned her."

"Why?" said Japan. "What did she do to make them so angry?"

"Her land used to belong to Virginia. But when the war broke out, the people in the west refused to secede and formed their own government, choosing to stay with the Union. Virginia…Virginia went through a great deal of pain when her land and people split from her, and she and the other southern states refused to recognize the separation, even when they saw that West had become her own person."

America looked very somber.

"They even tried to have West dissolved after the war."

"They tried to kill her?" Spain asked in disbelief. It was one thing to fight a war against one's family, even to the point of killing them on the battlefield, but to purposefully try to destroy them during a time of peace out of petty spite was just unthinkable. "Wouldn't she have been just a little baby at the time?"

"Didn't stop them," America replied grimly. "No matter what I did or said, they treated West like a pariah. West responded by always trying to do the opposite of whatever the other southern states did. Especially when it came to politics. Although, considering how things have been recently, I think West is willing to agree with the southern states on some things, now. But, well, old hurts don't go away easily. And it's always hard when people you love hate each other. I'm sure most of you know what civil wars are like, after all."
None of the nations could argue with that. Every single nation present had, at one time or another, been engulfed in civil war and split apart by their own people.

England had had at least three major ones, and a few smaller such conflicts. It was hard to count the number of times Prussia had gone head-to-head with his brothers in centuries past, to say nothing of the physical divide which had split him and Germany into rival East and West regions for decades (though not by their own choice). Russia, France, and Spain had all been driven to the point of insanity from bloody civil conflicts in the wake of revolutions gone awry. Lithuania had been devastated by two civil wars within only a few years until Grand Duke Jogaila managed to negotiate peace – only for Lithuania and Poland to get embroiled in conflicts with the Teutonic Order, again. Ireland was still very touchy on the subject of what happened between her and Northern Ireland not so long ago and she saw it as something of a miracle that the two of them were able to keep such a strong familial bond despite how much their respective people still hated each other. For Denmark, the strife of the Count's Feud had left him half-crazed as religious schism between Catholics and Protestants and the power-grabbing among the nobility forced him to question not just his political loyalties, but his very beliefs as a Christian. Only a few years after America had fought his civil war, Japan had had to deal with the overthrow of the shogunate and the anger directed towards him by the various domains who saw his institution of an empire as an act of betrayal. Even Veneziano and Romano had been pitted against each other on more than one occasion, with the Unification still heavy in their memories and their divided loyalties during WWII still a taboo subject at home.

Of course, it was one thing if the civil war involved just one personification. It was another when a whole family, including young children, was involved. No child should ever have to know their siblings hate them.

"America-" England spoke up.

"It's getting dark," America said suddenly. "We should go inside. Supper's probably on the table by now."

Without another word, America turned and went inside the house. The other nations stood there in silence for a few moments before following him in. No words needed to be said.

West Virginia was sitting on the roof of the house. The last traces of daylight had long disappeared in the distance. She was cleaning the weapons she and Tony had brought for hunting Mothman. Tony had already left a while ago, saying something about getting a bag of Fritos and a coke.

West Virginia didn't look up when her father approached and took a seat next to her.

"Been up here all day?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," West Virginia replied.

"You look a little sunburned."

"Yep."

"Have you eaten anything?"

"We really gonna do this, Daddy? What next? Are you gonna tell me to bundle up 'cause it's cold out? Or, I dunno, tell me it's past my bedtime and send me off to my room with a pat on the head?"
"I just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"Ever'thang's fine."

America handed her a large Tupperware container.

"What the…what's this?"

"I figured you hadn't eaten today. You never eat anything at any of the Confederate states' homes."

"I will not be obliged to them. Ever. What is this, anyhow?"

"Pepperoni rolls. Your favorite."

West Virginia flicked her blue eyes up to her father's face. A faint twitch crossed her lips before her stomach rumbled, prompting her to open the container and eat.

"Why'd ya have to invite those other nations here, Daddy?" she said after finishing her third roll.

"They're my friends," said America. "Some of them are even like family."

"I don't like 'em. They're mighty strange. Most of 'em clearly don't bathe regularly."

"She says with a coal smudge on her cheek," America quipped.

"What?! Where?!!" West Virginia began aggressively wiping her cheek against the sleeve of her shirt. "I swear," she muttered.

"Isn't that illegal in your state?" America added with a smile.

"Cut it out. I didn't come here to be teased."

"Why else would you be where your old man is? I am within my rights to tease and make lame Dad Jokes."

West Virginia did crack a small, genuine smile at that before frowning thoughtfully.

"Dad, how long are those nations stayin'?"

"Until they've heard the whole story," said America.

"That'll take a long time. Don't these folks have jobs to get back to? And why do they even want to know? Not like it's their business."

"Lenna, they need to hear the truth."

"I don't think they can stomach the entirety of the truth in one sittin'. And, really, Daddy, do you think you can tell them ever'thang at once?"

"I can try."

"You're gonna make 'em sit through a big, long history lecture for days? Daddy, do you 'member why I always did so badly at school?"

"Because you're a practical learner and prefer to go at your own pace?"

"No. Well, yes. But, no, I'm talkin' 'bout how the teachers was always tryin' to shove tons of facts
down my throat at once. I didn't know which facts to focus on."

"So, you're saying I need to slow down telling them the story?"

"I'm suggestin' that maybe you should give your friends time to digest what they've heard so they can understand it better. Once they have, you can bring 'em back for more of the story. Capisce?"

"I think I get it. You're right." America let out a tired sigh. "It's exhausting trying to get everything out at once. I need to rest. And…and I don't think this is the right place to finish the story, anyway. It was perfect for the beginning, but for the others to understand…I need to show them the other places where everything happened."

West Virginia picked up another pepperoni roll and resumed eating as her father fell into a contemplative silence.

The raucous sounds of hot jazz music rang through the club. Once upon a time, that music was considered a dangerous, corrupting force that lured people into immorality. The Devil may have gone down to Georgia, but he didn't stick around – if ever there was a place where Satan would settle in to stir up his sinful notes, it would be in the seething hive that was Louisiana.

And at that club, the state, herself, was seated next to her friend Veracruz and steadily drinking her body's weight in rum while her friend was enjoying a cerveza preparada as she said it was kind of cold that evening (Louisiana didn't even bat an eye as Veracruz kept added hot sauce to the drink as it "still wasn't hot enough").

"And why does my sister have to barge into my home like dis?" Louisiana continued.

"I don't know," Veracruz replied with a shrug. "Why does Oaxaca always borrow my favorite shoes and never return them? Why does Puebla disturb me during siesta so she can cry about why she hasn't found a nice, Catholic boyfriend?"

"Wasn't she goin' to ask out my cousin Quebec?"

"She changed her mind. Said he was 'too French.'"

Louisiana was about to retort by questioning what was wrong with being part French when she noticed a familiar figure swagger into the club.

"Oh, non, it is Florida," Louisiana groaned. "What does he want?"

"Ana!" Florida said cheerily as he caught sight of her. "¡Mi hermana!"

Louisiana let out a strangled noise as Florida came over to greet her. And, in this case, 'greet' meant clasp his hands to either side of her face and press his face uncomfortably close to hers while staring intently.

"¿Cuál es la fruta que más se ríe?" he said in a dead-serious tone.

"Which one?" Louisiana said resignedly.

"La naranja, ja, ja, ja…"

"Ay, that was terrible," Veracruz said, trying to hide her smile. Louisiana made terrible French puns
all the time, so hearing one in Spanish wasn't so irritating (and it wasn't even as bad as some of the jokes her own brothers liked to make).

Florida chuckled loudly as he released his hold on a scowling Louisiana, took a seat at the bar, and spun round on the barstool a few times.

"When are you gonna grow up, cher?" said Louisiana, her voice somewhat slurred by the quantity of rum in her bloodstream.

"Aw, Ana, what's wrong?" said Florida. "Only a few months ago we were the best of friends; having drinks together and plotting how to annoy people. Where did all of that go?"

"It's not your fault, Fernando," said Veracruz. "She's just pissy because West Virginia has chosen to intrude."

"Oh, that's understandable. Come on, Ana, cheer up. We're in the happiest place on earth other than Disney World. A bar! Bartender, a round of margaritas, por favor! Extra lime in mine."

"Hey, check out who else just walked in," Veracruz said, nodding towards the door.

The two U.S. states followed her gaze to find Cuba standing in the doorway. Florida began waving excitedly at the robust nation.

"Máximo, mi amigo," said Florida. "Please, join us. Let me buy you a drink."

While the nations might have been astonished that one of America's states would be happy to see Cuba, considering the bad blood that existed between Cuba and the U.S., the amicable bond between Cuba, Florida, and even Louisiana was known and understood by the personifications residing in North America. Cuba had even toned down a lot of his anti-U.S. rhetoric in recent years, though he still refused to associate with America, himself, outside of official business.

Cuba smiled at Florida and ruffled the boy's hair as he sat down next to him.

"How are you, li'l man?" the nation asked.

"Bueno. And yourself?"

"I guess as good as I can be, all things considered. Hola, Verónica, Antoinette," he added, nodding at the girls.

While Veracruz smiled and began to chat pleasantly with Cuba, Louisiana made a disgruntled noise and rested her head on the bar counter.

"What's with Ana?" Cuba asked.

"West Virginia," the others said together.

"I see."

"Why can't she keep her business on her turf?" Louisiana grumbled. "Do ya have any idea how irritatin' it is to have to pretend to be nice to dat sour-faced, dirt-draggin' yokel?"

"To be fair, you and the other Confederates tried to have her dissolved," said Veracruz. "That would make anyone bitter."

"Mind if I smoke?" Cuba asked, withdrawing a cigar from a case.
"Go ahead," Louisiana mumbled. "It don't bother us and de manager has never held wit' 'no smoking' guidelines."

"That's why I love this bar," said Florida fondly. "Hey, remember when we came here to celebrate Máximo getting his independence? That was a crazy night."

"May of 1902," Cuba said lighting up his cigar. "Man, where does the time go? How are those two niños of yours, huh?"

"Denise is pretty mellow, as usual, and Richard is still insisting I give him back to the British Empire."

Cuba shook his head in disappointment.

"I will never understand why my godson would ever want to be subject to one of those Old World _pendejos_," he said. "What about your daughter, Ana?"

Louisiana buried her head under her arms and groaned despairingly.

"She doesn't want to talk about it," said Veracruz.

"No kidding?" Cuba said in a dry tone. "What about you, Verónica? Anything crazy and scandalous that your mother hasn't told me about, yet?"

Veracruz took a long sip from the margarita the bartender had placed in front of her after she'd finished her _cerveza_.

"Nothing I want to repeat when we're trying to _lighten_ the mood," she said.

"You kids don't have any good stories, anymore," said Cuba. "You used to be all kinds of wild and adventurous. Maybe capitalism has made you bloated and lazy, as I said it would."

"Don't be talkin' politics in my bar," Louisiana said warningly. "We don't hold wit' no commie talk, y'hear?"

"_Lo siento_, my apologies, Ana. I was not being serious, you know."

"_Non, non_, I'm sorry. I am just a bit irritated from everyt'in' goin' on at home."

"Has something happened?"

"Ay, I'll say," said Veracruz. "What with all those nations staying at her house while her father tells them about the sordid history of the family. Not to mention her failed Voodoo ritual to drive her _madre_'s spirit into the afterlife."

"Bartender," said Florida. "I think we're going to need another round over here."

America was standing in front of the portrait of South that hung in the dining room. The other nations had shuffled off to the drinks cabinet in the other room to contemplate what he'd told them, aided by ample amounts of booze.

"She was quite beautiful," a gentle voice said behind him. America turned and his gaze met France's.
"That she was," America replied.

"Well, understandable, considering she was a colony of mine." France's tone was teasing, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "I wish I could have been there for her. I should have given her the same love and attention I tried to give to Canada."

"It's not entirely your fault, France."

"That is kind of you to say, mon ami, but I am not above admitting when I have failed."

"Yeah? Since when?" It was America's turn to smile.

"Such cheek!" France rested a hand on America's shoulder in a good-natured way. "I suppose I haven't always been so forthright about my failures. Though, it certainly says something when your former colony doesn't even want you at her wedding when you should be the one walking her down the aisle."

America looked at France questioningly, but the older nation had trained his gaze onto the portrait. As little as she might have resembled France, there was some faint trace in South's appearance that indicated a familial connection – however distant. Perhaps it was in the haughty, pearly-toothed smile or the glimmer of mischief in her eyes. Whatever the case, France examined the portrait with undisguised sorrow and regret.

"What led her down the path to her destruction, Amérique?" France asked, finally breaking the silence.

"I wish I could give you a solid answer for that, France. A lot of people think it was because she was a bigot and wouldn't end slavery, so the 'good, virtuous, and tolerant' people in the North had to put an end to it." America's tone had become unusually cynical as he said that. "The truth of that, though, is that she and the rest of the Southerners weren't any worse than anyone else in the country. If anything, they were probably the lesser of two evils."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The North was hardly the bastion of virtue most people think it was. Tenements, exploitation of workers, unsanitary city conditions, indentured servitude that was little better than slavery, discrimination against immigrants and minorities, child labor…Honestly, there really wasn't that much that made one side better than the other. And only a small group in the North was even actually fighting to end slavery, and even they were treated with distrust by the rest of the Northerners."

"If the argument over slavery wasn't the reason you two drifted apart, what caused your civil war?"

"Well, as I said, I don't know what all was going through South's mind, but, if I had to guess, I think it was because she was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Dying. She was terrified of dying. After the Louisiana Territory was dissolved and our daughter Louisiana was born, South started getting weak. It got worse after each new state, and I kept having her rechristened as different territories until she finally decided she would just be the American South. Once that happened, though, she started acting strange. She behaved like a completely different nation and began to define herself by archaic standards, as if she was trying to recreate herself as a new version of ancient Rome or Greece. And the more I tried to bring her back to how she was before, the more she resisted and dug herself into the 'Southern' culture she was making
because she thought it was the only thing keeping her from dying."

"That is terrible," France gasped. "That she spent so much time living in fear of her own mortality that she pushed away what should have mattered most to her."

"It's my fault," said America. "Maybe if I'd listened better or known how to help her through the problems she was having, things might've turned out differently."

"Non, America, you are not to blame in this."

"Oh, no? If her fears of death weren't responsible, then what happened between me and Mexico certainly drove the wedge in deeper."

"Amérique, what did happen between you and Mexico? You have been so vague about it that I am unsure what to think."

America let out a tired breath.

"All right," he said. "Let's go join the others. I said I would tell my story, and I am a man of my word."

The two men entered into the sitting room where the other nations awaited them. While the pain and terror of the War of 1812 was past, the tale was far from over.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I debated it with myself for a while, but I have come to the conclusion that, whenever there is a strong source of division in a country, the nation will begin hearing a voice in his/her head telling them to do horrible things. It's why the perfectly nice, sweet Hetalia countries are capable of committing acts of violence, bigotry, and oppression; it's not because they or their people are bad, it is because anger, fear, and hatred often take control over them in wars, political instability, dictatorships, etc. The nations are impacted by both the good people and the bad. That's not to say the nations aren't capable of making bad decisions or acting like jerks on their own, but the truly horrific acts are guided by these dark voices and it takes tremendous strength of will for the nations to break free.

Mothman is a legendary monster said to haunt the West Virginia town of Point Pleasant. Theories about the creature range from it being an extraterrestrial being to the vengeful spirit of a Native American chieftain.

I think pretty much every nation in history has had a civil war of some kind; it's – unfortunately – not as rare as we would like to think. England, as I said, has had multiple civil wars (The Anarchy, the War of the Roses, and the English Civil War – between the Royalists and Parliamentarians –, just to name the most notable).

Cerveza preparada is a style of Mexican drink in which beer is mixed with hot sauce/tomato juice/salsa. It's kind of like a Bloody Mary but with beer instead of vodka.

¿Cuál es la fruta que más se ríe?...La naranja, ja, ja, ja, ja,…: A very stupid pun in Spanish which I found. Translation: Which fruit laughs the most?...The orange, ha, ha, ha, ha.
I think that Cuba and Florida have a brotherly bond, despite Cuba's bad relationship with America, and Florida even named Cuba the godfather to Conch Republic and British West Florida. Florida has a huge Cuban-American population (as it's where most Cuban refugees end up when they flee Cuba). Cuba also used to be a U.S. territory but was given independence after only a couple years.

Can I just say that I wish there was more America and France relationship in fics? Not even shipping, necessarily (though I will admit that FrUS is a personal favorite ship of mine, despite how little following it has). I just wish people would show more of France and America together in fics to show the wholesome side of their relationship, but fics with them in it seem to focus more on their relationships with England and Canada than with each other (which is a pity, as France is one of my top three favorite characters; along with America and Hungary).

As much as I enjoy writing the historical narratives, I really want to get back to the states. I still haven't properly introduced Indiana or Wisconsin, yet, and I feel like I need to get them introduced before I write about the Civil War. Next chapter will be a historical narrative, but, after that, I will go back to the states for a while (it is supposed to be a state-fic, after all) though I will wrap up the rest of the historical arc.

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