

## Lif & Lifthrasir

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## Lif & Lifthrasir

by [snark\\_sniper](#)

### Summary

On May 10, 1940, Iceland is occupied by England; per tradition, the personification of Iceland is brought to London to live in England's household. An Asian colony greets him at the door.

(A story of coming of age in quarantine.)

### Notes

This fic has been five years coming, but they were five necessary years.

I toyed with this idea before, but it came into consciousness in summer 2015, when I visited Iceland and London. In both places I heard the song "Little Talks" (Of Monsters and Men) which became my inspiration song. This fic was almost named for it.

In 2016 I took a Norse mythology class in university and subsequently became obsessed. I finished my big APH series and wrote the first 8,000 words of this fic, many of which had to be revised later. Along the way I found OMaM's "Yellow Light", a secondary inspiration song.

In 2017 I made an outline and timeline and never came back to either.

In 2018 I wrote a single scene that was since discarded.

In 2019 I visited Hong Kong. I also picked up the idea of discorporation from the Good Omens miniseries (and the book I bought at the HK airport) and modified it for my purposes.

In 2020, just before the six-year anniversary of my setting foot in Iceland, COVID-19 happened, and I came to understand quarantine and all the feelings it drudges up. The toughest lesson I had to learn while writing this fic is that it can't be solely a love story. It's a coming-of-age story, and I'm more of age now than when I first had this idea.

See the end notes for works cited.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

*April 8, 1940*

They come in the dead of night, clutching carpet bags and suitcases filled with whatever they'd prepared or grabbed upon receiving the summons. The journey from Copenhagen was short; Malmö is visible on the horizon at all times. Still, many of them weep to look back at Danish soil, knowing they might never return.

Only the captain and the personification of Denmark stare stonily ahead.

Denmark personally sees every Jew off the boat and onto the streets of Malmö, all the while aware that one pair of eyes is trained upon him. When he's inspected the boat for the last traces of its passengers and returned the last lost toy to its shivering owner, he goes to stand beside his witness at the pier.

"You don't have to do this," says the personification of Sweden.

"I know what the Germans do to these people," says Denmark. He matches Sweden's gaze, staring across the water at the glimmering lights of his capital. "They're safer with you."

"I mean you don't have to surrender," says Sweden.

"I don't have the forces to fight back." Denmark snorts. "Ya would have paid good money to hear that centuries ago, eh?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sweden glances at Denmark. "What about *Norge*?"

Any trace of a smirk falls off Denmark's face. "I sent word. Told him to get out. He should be crossing your border too."

"I can't protect everyone, Dan."

"No. You can't, and you aren't."

"I'm in no better position than you—"

"You *are*." Denmark closes his eyes. "I'd give anything to stay neutral."

"Not to fight?"

"Don't ask me the same questions I keep asking myself. The me of a thousand years ago, he'd have fought. But these are new wars. I can't...not this time. I'd give my life for them, if I knew they'd be safe. But I don't even know that."

Sweden remains silent for a moment. "...What about Ice, Dan?"

Denmark reaches into his coat pocket, an unexpected movement which Sweden watches warily. Denmark emerges with a small envelope, plainly marked but for a name.

"Do me a favor," he says. "Get this to him."

"Neutrality doesn't mean running errands for an invaded nation."

“Sve,” says Denmark. For the first time since he stepped up beside Sweden, he turns to look his old adversary in the eye. “If you had any love for us—any love at all, at any time in our long *fucking* lives. For the family we used to be. You give this to him.”

The two stare each other down. Sweden’s shoulders lift. Lower.

He takes the envelope and slides it into an inner pocket of his coat.

“What will I tell him?” he asks. A dock away, the Danish ship blows its whistle one lonely time across the Malmö bay.

Denmark takes a step backward. “The truth,” he says. “That I love him. And I’m sorry.”

He turns away and begins his walk towards his ship—towards home, towards the captivity and degradation he’ll face tomorrow at Nazi hands.

Sweden remains standing at the pier, hands clasped behind his back, watching the ship until he can no longer distinguish its lights from the lights of Denmark on the inky Baltic Sea.

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*May 10, 1940*

When Iceland first sees the shores of the United Kingdom, he grasps his book tighter to his chest and steels himself.

These are the rules, he tells himself repeatedly. He ignores England beside him, who is reluctantly relinquishing control of the radio to the pilot, so they can announce their affiliation with the UK and not be shot down. Iceland has been invaded by England; therefore, he has to go with England.

Never mind that his brothers, Denmark and Norway, had the good sense to leave him at home with his people, even when they invaded his lands. Never mind that, on the rare occasion he was taken from home, he was consulted and listened to and allowed more than half an hour to prepare himself to be taken away. Never mind that he usually left his own people with a sense of honorable duty, rather than the raw outrage that stemmed from the injustice of—and Iceland reminds himself of this every time England accidentally elbows him in the ribs—being invaded by *England*, who used to cower in fear of his brothers’ Viking armies.

No, he thinks as he watches the North Sea disappear and give way to territory that long ago belonged to the Norse. This invasion is wrong, unfair, *dishonorable*. But there’s nothing he can do.

He hasn’t heard from Denmark or Norway since early April. The ships that trade with his land come less frequently and, sometimes, in pieces. This also happened in the Great War, the one Iceland was assured would be the end of all wars. Then Poland was invaded in 1939—no thanks to England, he reminds himself with a glare at the man in question—and all of a sudden war had returned as quickly and rabidly as a dying fire whose embers found new flare.

But Iceland wasn’t invaded last war.

“Buck up, lad,” says England. Iceland wonders if he means to break the tension between them, now that England has been kicked off the radio and cut off from his strategists on the ground. “We haven’t got enough spare ships to keep you forever. It’s just a precaution. And it’s for your own good.”

English feels clunky on Iceland's tongue, but his retorts have been seething since he left Icelandic ground, and they need to escape no matter the language. "Is that what you say to all of your colonies?"

England sighs and runs a hand through one side of his hair. From the look of it, he's been doing this a lot. "You're not a colony. You haven't got much to interest us," he says with a weak smile, as if this is a joke or at least a comfort. "Think of it as babysitting."

"I am not a baby," says Iceland with enough ferocity to cause the pilot and copilot to glance back at them.

"No, you're not," England amends hastily. "But you're not quite independent either, are you. That's just how it is for you, lad."

"You have no right to take me," says Iceland.

"Oh?" says England. His expression becomes steelier. "If not us, then who? You're isolated, but not invisible. The damned kraut wants you as an airbase, did you know?"

"He can't have me."

"Exactly," says England, as if Iceland is finally seeing reason. At this point the pilot signals that England can retake the radio, and he gladly does, leaving Iceland alone with his thoughts. He's wedged in the back of a minuscule plane with a single suitcase pressed against his knees and one of his most precious books in his arms.

Iceland's emotions alternate between anger and grief as sea gives way to countryside, countryside to city. His home doesn't look like this from the air. He's only flown once or twice at American demonstrations, but he knows that much. This land of yellow and green squares, of gray urban sprawl, looks nothing like the snow-capped mountains and brown tundra he knows by every inch.

He's been a Christian for a good half of his life now, but he finds himself begging the old gods to let him see home again one day soon. The new god connects him to the rest of Europe, but the old gods live within his home and his family. Appealing to them now seems wise, wiser than anything England is doing.

When they hear about this, Denmark and Norway will be furious. They'll see to England as soon as they can reach him, Iceland is sure.

By the time the pilot and copilot start making noises about reaching London, Iceland has stewed and strained himself to exhaustion. He tries not to look out the window as the plane descends, because seeing a single city hold more people and houses than his entire homeland is too much for him to bear. Still, the gray stain out of the corner of his eye mocks him and makes him tense.

The plane lands, and Iceland can barely contort his way out of the back seat. England holds his suitcase, but Iceland nearly snarls when he tries to take the book away. He still grasps it in one hand when his shaking feet touch the English tarmac.

The sky is gray, like home but still so different, so foreign. England, half a step ahead at all times and constantly speaking to those who manage to match his pace, leads Iceland to a waiting car. Iceland recalls the fanfare, the music and crowds that followed him to his brothers' kings and queens and warrior leaders, and feels simultaneously put out and relieved by this anonymous reception.

The car is odd, with two rows of passenger seats that face each other. England takes the seat facing

backwards, to Iceland's quiet relief; he's beginning to feel sick, and moving backwards in a car feels like the last thing he needs.

"You'll be placed with the governments in exile," says England. He spares Iceland a glance before he picks up the file folders waiting for him in the car. In that one glance, Iceland sees for the first time the glassy sheen of England's eyes, as if he's about to reach his limit of work for the day. The small clock in the car tells him it's three in the afternoon. "They stay in my own home," England adds. "It's not as prestigious as anyone would like, I'm sure, but it's the best I can offer."

England pauses, waiting for thanks or perhaps another retort about how wrong this invasion is. Iceland decides not to give him the satisfaction of either. Unfortunately, the only other place to look is out the window.

Even in wartime, the dresses and suits and military uniforms of London look so much more fashionable and well-kept than those of the richest people in Iceland. Unlike in Iceland, where news is relatively scarce and contained to shops and gossip, newsboys cry out headlines on every block. Iceland's English is too inexperienced for him to understand half the words, but the photos of airplanes, warships, and stern-looking leaders tell him more than he wants to know.

Despite himself, Iceland balks at the number of foreign faces: of Indian and Chinese and even black people. He's seen them before, knows them from stories of his brothers' travels, but their sheer presence here underscores that *this is not home*, that he has been taken from home and he doesn't know when he'll see home again.

If his shuddering breaths catch England's attention, England pretends not to notice.

After weaving through the streets of London, the car finally stops at a thin multistory house wedged between identical buildings on a nondescript street. Iceland is sure that this house—England's home—is close to somewhere important, his government perhaps or the home of his king, but he frankly no longer cares.

As England opens the car door, the front door of his home opens too, as if it's been rehearsed. A boy about Iceland's age, Asian by the looks of it, steps onto the porch, closes the door quietly behind him, and waits at the top step with his hands folded behind his back.

"Come on, lad," says England, noticing that Iceland hasn't made any effort to leave the car. "Better in there than out here." He exits the car first.

Iceland purses his lips and takes a deep breath. Somehow it's harder to get out of the car than the airplane, now that he can see his final destination. The house looks like England, polite but chilly and unused to entertaining. His standalone home outside Reykjavik at least had a chimney to suggest warmth.

"Lad," England intones. The driver has brought out his suitcase and set it on the curb at England's feet.

Iceland braces himself and steps out of the car. He grabs his suitcase before England can pretend to be polite, and stands staring at the only other face on the street: the Asian boy.

England gestures Iceland to go up the steps, and walks alongside him. The car speeds off. "Leon," he greets calmly. They're in public, after all. "I trust everything is well."

"Nothing eventful while you were gone, sir," says "Leon". Iceland stares at this boy—nation, he's certain—trying to recall which colonies England has in Asia.

“No word from—?”

“Only messages from your generals,” says Leon.

If England is disappointed, he shows it only in the sharpness of his nod. “Very well. We have a new guest,” he says, gesturing to Iceland. “This is—er...”

Iceland furrows his brow. England spent so long at the Allthing, cajoling and reasoning and eventually demanding the invasion of Iceland and the removal of its personification, but he forgot to ask for the alias of his newest conquest. “Emil,” he says.

“Emil,” England repeats, relieved. “Sorry, lad, but it’s been a day.”

Iceland doesn’t smile. Leon raises an eyebrow.

“I trust you have his bed ready?” England asks Leon, who nods. “Good, good, then would you mind—?”

“Leave it to me,” says Leon. He opens the door just enough for them to enter single-file, and when Iceland steps inside, he understands why. The reception area has two tables pressed against both the walls, and both are covered in thin piles of manila envelopes and letters, at least half of which are marked with some form of urgency. Not all of them are in English.

“The house is under surveillance, of course,” says England, noticing Iceland’s stares, “but the truly important post is locked up at Parliament. Most of this is outgoing, or post for the residents. Now, I leave you with Leon. He’s been around long enough, he’ll answer everything you need to know. But of course I’ll be about if you need me.” England nods, but doesn’t leave immediately. The three of them stand in the foyer. After a few seconds, Iceland suspects he’s supposed to say something in return.

England breaks the silence. He says more softly, “I am sorry, you know. If circumstances weren’t as they are, I would have been happy to leave you be.”

“You could have,” Iceland mutters.

“No. I couldn’t.” England closes his eyes grimly. “Please believe me. I’m doing my best.”

England turns and scoops up a pile that Iceland can’t distinguish from the rest of the envelopes on the table and, with a nod to Iceland and Leon, vanishes up the stairs.

Iceland turns to see Leon looking at him with a cocked head. “How was the plane ride?” he asks.

The fact that Leon asks such a normal, seemingly agreeable question—that this is the beginning of a pleasant stay and not Iceland’s imprisonment—is the final wave of frustration to beat against and finally break Iceland’s defenses. For the first time since he saw the shores of the UK from the plane, his eyes threaten to spill with tears.

“I thought as much,” murmurs Leon. “Come on, then.”

He takes Iceland’s suitcase and leads him up the narrow staircase, taking care not to look behind him as Iceland rubs the back of his fist against his cheeks, as he presses his book against his stomach like he’s covering a gaping wound. The hard cover of the book is starting to feel soft in his sweaty palms after so many hours of clenching, but he doesn’t care. The book is from home.

They climb to the topmost floor, the fourth story, past open doors that peer into sitting rooms with

makeshift beds and closed doors with muffled conversations. Leon opens the sole attic door to reveal a narrow room with two beds, a bedside table, and two wardrobes. There's a dirty window, framed with heavy curtains, that Iceland would have to stand in front of to peer out of.

"My room," says Leon. "And now yours too."

Iceland feels like he should say something, but his throat is filled with the emotions he's been suppressing since he first saw the Union Jack on the horizon. He feels like he's going to vomit.

Leon sets Iceland's suitcase beside the bed and looks Iceland in the eye. "I'll be downstairs for the rest of the day. If you need me, ask the first person you see for Hong Kong." Leon—Hong Kong—looks like he's going to add something else, but decides against it at the last moment. He offers Iceland one touch on his bicep—not even a pat, just a light touch—and brushes past him, closing the door behind him.

Iceland launches himself into the bed and heaves a sob into the pillow.

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Iceland falls asleep lying sideways on the bed, still wearing his travel clothes and wrapped around his book like a cat curled around its kitten. He sleeps through the afternoon and most of the night, and awakens before dawn. He doesn't realize it at first, because the electric light in their room is turned on. Only the tinges of pink outside the window and the deep breathing of Hong Kong in the adjacent bed inform him of the real time.

He drifts back asleep, more fitfully this time, and wakes up to an empty bed beside him. The light is turned off again, and Iceland decides that his brief stirring at dawn was only a dream. Unlike the rest of these past few days.

He lies in bed, staring at the plaster ceiling that slopes with the roof, and wonders what he's supposed to do now.

His gurgling stomach answers him. As much as he dislikes it, as much as he would like to spend the rest of his invasion in this room out of protest, he needs to eat.

He steps out of the room and immediately startles at the creaking of the floor. The light carpeting does nothing to dampen the noise of the floorboards. He hits three squealing spots before even reaching the stairs, and a quiet part of his mind wonders how, if he finds a way to get back to Iceland, he's going to be able to sneak away.

He walks quickly down the steps, speeding past open doors as best he can. This isn't an army camp but a *house*, and he's never shared one with anyone but family. Already he worries about privacy.

He reaches the first floor and hears sizzling and a tray being pulled from a metal oven. He slowly opens the door to see a woman with short blonde hair, unevenly hacked off, alternating between flipping sizzling bacon on the stove and lifting pastries from a pan to a plate.

"Good morning," says a voice across from Iceland. It's Hong Kong, sitting at the table and reading the newspaper with a cup of tea at his side. If he were sitting at the head of the table instead of just to the side, Iceland would think Hong Kong owned this house rather than England. "I was wondering if you would come," he continues.

The woman at the stove turns around and wipes her hand on her apron. She offers Iceland a smile, the first one Iceland has seen that isn't tinged with distraction or concern. "You must be Iceland,"



she says. "It's good to finally meet you. I'm Belgium. Marie," she adds, glancing out the front window to the street.

Iceland has heard of Belgium, mostly with the word "invaded" somewhere in the same sentence. She was a sore point in the Great War, being such a flat land and a convenient route for Germany to reach France. He's surprised to see her looking so cheery, but decides not to comment on it. "How do you do," he says instead.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she asks. "I haven't started on the eggs just yet, but the croissants are fresh." She gestures to the pastries still cooling on the plate.

"...Yes, please," he says. Belgium prepares a plate with the pastry and two still-sizzling pieces of bacon. Like at home, the bacon is thickly cut; not surprising, Iceland supposes, because he imports it from England. The bacon alone, though, would have cost him a fortune.

Belgium shoos him to sit beside Hong Kong and places a jar of jam and a butter dish before Iceland. Iceland supposes it's for the pastry, but he has no idea how to cut something so flaky and oddly-shaped.

"Don't get used to this," says Hong Kong. He's misinterpreted Iceland's confusion as surprise. "It's just because this is your first day. Normally we're on rations, same as everyone." He takes a sip from his teacup, and Iceland sees that he's not drinking tea, but watered-down coffee. Hong Kong drinks it slowly, as if he already misses having it in the cup.

"We need every special occasion we can get." Belgium pretends to be cross, but Iceland sees the way she smiles more somberly as she whisks the eggs. "And besides. We don't have nearly as many mouths to feed as we'd expected."

Iceland sticks a butter knife into the side of the pastry, and small brown flakes erupt over his plate and the tablecloth. He continues to stare at it quietly, in case he's offending Belgium's cooking by making such an obvious mess. "What do you mean?"

"England told you who lives here, right?" Hong Kong asks.

"...Yes, probably." Iceland is trying very hard not to remember yesterday.

"All of the countries in exile. I'd say about half a dozen governments are operating out of London, now that Germany has invaded their lands. But just because the government is here, doesn't mean the nation is."

"Who do you have?" asks Iceland. From the way Belgium's smile drops, he feels like he's being rude, but the phrase "Germany has invaded their lands" echoes in his head. Denmark is Germany's neighbor, and Denmark also hasn't been in contact with him for more than a month.

Hong Kong looks at Iceland. "Who are you hoping we have?"

"Honestly, that's enough," says Belgium. She sets another plate on the table with more force than necessary. "Eat. We hear enough of this war at breakfast."

"I don't," says Iceland, and he immediately regrets the indignation in his voice.

"You will," says Hong Kong.

Iceland gives up on cutting apart the pastry and spreads jam on the outside. He eats, vaguely acknowledging that Belgium is a good cook, but thinking more of his family. Denmark is

Germany's neighbor. Denmark hasn't sent anything across the North Sea. Neither has Norway, but if something has happened to Denmark, then what happens to Norway, or even Sweden, and poor Finland has been fighting in the east for years now—

“Morning,” says a new voice, male and only a year or so older than Iceland or Hong Kong. Iceland looks up from his pastry to see a young man in a worn vest stretching in the doorway. “You must be the reason Marie gets to cook.”

“Lucien,” Belgium scolds, and erupts into a language that Iceland doesn't know. It has the same guttural quality with which she said the word “croissant”. The young man, Lucien, responds in the same language, and then returns to Iceland.

“I'm Luxembourg. Call me Lucien when you have to.”

“Iceland, and Emil,” Iceland responds.

“We haven't had a new person since we've arrived,” Luxembourg explains as he grabs a plate and helps himself to three slices of bacon. He tries for a fourth, but Belgium slaps his hand away. “Even England's colonies are staying away from us, present company excluded.” He gestures to Hong Kong.

Iceland looks at Hong Kong as well. He wonders why they've received this colony in particular, but he can't think of a polite way to bring it up.

“It's fine to ask,” says Hong Kong. “I'm certainly used to it. The shortest answer is that there's not much I can do anywhere else. The longer answer is that the only military I have is English, so sending me back won't rally a military that isn't mine to begin with.”

“And the even longer answer,” Luxembourg interjects, “is that Hong Kong isn't nearly as big and strong as his colony brothers, and England still likes him best.”

“Liking me and liking my obedience aren't the same thing,” says Hong Kong. “Besides, Canada tends to give me a run for my money.”

Iceland is surprised by the deflection. Growing up, he'd always enjoyed a special place with his brothers, but largely because their languages and cultures blended together so well. In the days of the Norse, his people were even celebrated by his brothers as poets and scholars. Most of Denmark's other possessions—Greenland, Faroe, even England and his siblings at one point—had less to do with the Nordics than did Iceland, simply because they were so different. Now here is Hong Kong, an apparent stranger to Europe, who's been entrusted with a responsibility that England himself should be bearing. By the sound of it, he gets the job not because it's a punishment, but because England trusts him—favors him, even, despite that they should have nothing in common. That a colony can be favored not for his culture but for himself surprises Iceland. Either times have changed, or England has.

“You ought to be grateful that I'm here,” Hong Kong goes on. “Someone has to run the house, and at least England is used to having me around to ask him for things.”

“I didn't know how adept you were at getting around the rations,” says Belgium, sitting at the table beside Luxembourg and across from Iceland. It takes Iceland a moment to realize she's being sarcastic; nothing in her expression gives her away, but Hong Kong grins anyway.

“You should have seen my bartering skills in Kowloon,” he says. “They transfer pretty well to London, all told.”

“We’ll be shopping together tomorrow, yeah?” asks Luxembourg.

“Iceland’s the newest,” says Hong Kong, glancing at him. “We need to find his partner.”

Iceland realizes belatedly that Hong Kong is suggesting he can't leave the house unaccompanied.

“Shopping is our only outing,” Belgium clarifies, seeing Iceland’s confusion. “We go in pairs to avoid getting lost, and for company.”

“It’s often best not to get too close to the locals,” Hong Kong adds. “None of us know who’s spying for the Germans.”

“...So?” Iceland asks.

“So, if the Germans hear where we live, they’ll know where to find us and take us back,” says Luxembourg. “You know the rules. You’re invaded, you’re taken. And we’ve avoided being taken.”

Iceland’s heart sinks to hear this. He himself is in no immediate danger that he knows of, but some quiet part of his mind was hoping to at least walk unaccompanied, to distract himself from his troubles like he used to do at home. But if he doesn't take them up on this chance at an outing, he'll have nowhere else to be but the attic room.

“I’ll take you to market,” says Hong Kong gently. “If you get tired of me, we’ll find you someone else.”

Iceland glances to him. After a moment's consideration, he nods.

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After breakfast, Hong Kong escorts Iceland back up the four flights of stairs to their shared bedroom and sits him on the bed. He takes a seat across from him, resting his elbows on his thighs. “I need to tell you this before you find out another way,” he says.

Iceland nods, confused.

“About who’s supposed to be here.”

Iceland’s lungs feel like they’ve been clenched by a fist.

“How much do you know?” asks Hong Kong.

“I haven’t spoken to anyone in my family in a month,” says Iceland. “At first I thought they were just busy, but when England came...”

“So you don’t know...” Hong Kong pauses. “Do you know who Germany has so far?”

“Belgium and Luxembourg, I guess,” says Iceland.

“The Netherlands too. His government and royal family are in London, but he didn’t come with them. We don’t know where he is. He’s the brother of Belgium and Luxembourg,” Hong Kong adds, “so...try to be kind about it.”

Iceland nods.

“The Germans have Poland, of course. Slovakia lives downstairs, but he won’t come out of his room. Czech’s most likely with Germany. Greece is supposed to live here, but he lives with Egypt, who’s an English colony. We have no idea where the Yugoslavia siblings are. And we only have one message from France.”

“...And?”

“...And we’re missing Denmark.”

Iceland stares blankly. “Dan.”

“Yes, he’s...he was invaded a month ago. He’s being managed by the German Foreign Office, there’s no way we could get him, but...” Hong Kong breaks off when he sees Iceland’s hands trembling. “Do you want some good news?”

“Please.” Iceland fears his voice will break

“Norway is safe so far. The Luftwaffe—the, er, German planes—tried to attack a small town where his government was staying, but one of England’s ships brought the king further up north. So, southern Norway belongs to Germany, but the Norwegian king still has the north.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“The king?”

“Norway.”

“Nothing. But we think he’s safe.”

“Sweden will take care of him.”

“That’s...er.”

Iceland stares at Hong Kong. “What?”

“I might be misremembering this. I did most of this research myself, so I might have misunderstood. But Sweden seemed to...well, forbid the king from crossing the border.”

“*What?*” Iceland stands up. It felt like only yesterday that Sweden had dragged his brother out of the Kalmar Union, and here he is now, denying his brother the same safety he’d promised in the past.

“I don’t know why,” says Hong Kong, still sitting. Fuming, Iceland eases himself back into a sitting position. “I think they’re trying to stay neutral. And...maybe Sweden himself doesn’t want that. It’s been difficult to hear from our kind these days.”

“I just don’t understand,” says Iceland. “We were—we used to be allies. Sweden’s not my brother, but...he used to be a friend.”

“Yes, well. Germany used to be a friend, too.”

Iceland looks at Hong Kong, who’s looking down at his hands as they rest on his knees. “Thank you for researching that,” says Iceland quietly. “You didn’t have to.”

“It’s only fair,” says Hong Kong. “You probably know less than any of us about the world.”

Iceland makes a strangled sound of objection, but he knows it's true. Denmark and Norway tell him as much as they think is appropriate, but never the whole truth. He used to be frustrated with it, but now, to be honest, he misses it. Or more accurately, he misses *them*.

"What does Germany do to those he invades?" he asks.

"I don't know," says Hong Kong. "I just...hope he remembers who we are to him."

"Like England does?"

"Oh no, England forgets us half the time. But he's trying."

Iceland looks at Hong Kong with a tilted head. "You seem to like him. For being a colony."

"I disagree with a lot of what he's done. But England, personally...he could be much worse."

Iceland looks around at this room he shares with Hong Kong. It's sparse, but—and Iceland shudders with worry to think of this—his brothers may very well be worse off. "I suppose so," he murmurs.

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After three nights in London, Iceland notices that every evening the electric lights have been turned on overnight.

"Hong Kong," he mutters as he hears his roommate clamber out of bed.

"Hm?" Hong Kong asks. He opens the blackout curtains and crosses the room to the light switch beside the door.

"Why did you turn on the lights?"

Hong Kong stands there, silently. He looks out at the window at the other side of the room, where the clouds are pinkening with dawn.

He turns off the light. "Never mind that."

Iceland falls back asleep before he can repeat the question.

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Hong Kong takes him on a shopping trip five days after Iceland's arrival. Iceland is glad for the excuse to leave. He's spent every day in his room, apart from meals. Belgium has invited him to listen to the radio with her in the evenings, but he feels so horribly unused to the rapid-fire English. Hong Kong, Belgium, and Luxembourg all speak slowly enough that Iceland can understand, though he doesn't know whether they do it out of kindness or because they themselves aren't fully fluent.

Instead, to pass the days he sat on his bed and read his sole book. Again, and again. He hasn't even unpacked his suitcase; when he changes clothes, he puts the old shirts back where they were folded. Yesterday it took him an hour to muster the willpower to change.

Today, shopping day, he put on his least tattered coat. Maybe he's excited to step into the streets of London, but more likely, he's happy to not be confined by an immediate four walls.

At least, until Hong Kong leads him through half a dozen streets of lookalike houses.

“Isn’t there a park somewhere?” Iceland asks, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

“Near the market,” Hong Kong responds. “But we should bring the groceries home as quickly as possible so we can put them in the icebox.” He looks at Iceland. “Why? Did you want to go?”

Iceland wants very badly to see a tree that isn’t surrounded by concrete. He knows he’s not going to get the wide expanses of shrubs and volcanic rock he knows from home, so a tree like those on Norway’s vast mountains is the next best thing.

But damned if he lets anyone think he’s becoming claustrophobic so quickly.

“No, I’m fine,” he says.

Hong Kong nods slowly and shifts the empty bags he carries on his shoulders.

“I have a question,” he says.

Iceland hums in response. He’s looking at the rooftops, trying to look for leaves that might indicate this nearby park. Maybe just a glimpse of it will satisfy him.

“That book you read every day. What is it?”

Iceland pauses. When he looks at Hong Kong, Hong Kong is gazing at him with curious eyes and an impassive face.

“Just something from home,” Iceland says.

“I imagined as much. But it’s in your language. I can’t make it out.”

“You tried reading it?”

“Just the cover. Some of the words look English, if you squint.”

“I’m sure you brought books from your home, too.”

“I wasn’t much of a reader as a boy,” says Hong Kong. “Yao tried to teach me, but every time I learned one character, there was another I didn’t know. And Yao always gave me his reading of the character, never mine.”

Iceland knows enough to guess that Yao is China, who had Hong Kong before England. Instead he asks, “Character?”

“Where I come from, we don’t use an alphabet. We have characters. They’re like little drawings, and they tell you what the writer is talking about.”

Iceland frowns. “How do you know what it sounds like, then?”

“You just have to know.”

“That doesn’t sound very smart.”

“It’s older than your alphabet,” says Hong Kong mildly. “And besides, when I came here and started learning English, I hated all the exceptions in spelling. England tried to pretend his writing was better, but it was almost as hard to learn as Cantonese.”

“...I agree,” says Iceland. “At least in Icelandic, if you want to know how to write a word, you just need to write each sound. Usually.”

Hong Kong snorts, and the corner of his lips turn up. “Usually?”

“More often than English, anyway.”

Hong Kong nods. “The most difficult part for me was the ‘th’ sound. I think only English has it, though England swears he heard it from somewhere else. And half the time I said it, I was saying it wrong. It took me years to learn that you have to use your voice for one sort of ‘th’, and not for the other.”

“...England got that from me.”

They’re reaching a busier street where cars are sputtering by. Hong Kong stops at the crosswalk and turns to stare at Iceland. “That’s yours?”

“I mean.” Iceland isn’t sure whether to feel defensive. “My brothers used it too. We all spoke Norse, and we invaded England.”

“You.”

“...Mostly my brothers.”

“I’m sure you could too,” says Hong Kong. He grins. “You and your big blue eyes, leading a bloodthirsty army.”

Iceland takes a moment to realize Hong Kong is joking. “I would have been an *amazing* warrior if I was old enough,” he sputters.

Hong Kong only chuckles, but it feels amiable, like he secretly agrees. After a moment, he quiets and lets his eyes scan the area. Iceland realizes belatedly that they’re inching towards a more densely-populated part of London. They ought not to be talking about these things so loudly.

“Did it give you any trouble as a child?” Hong Kong asks more quietly as they cross the street. “The two ‘th’ sounds?”

“No. But that’s because my language has two different letters for it. They’re not just written like ‘th’, like England made it. And he only did *that* because the printing press wouldn’t let him keep the old letters.” Iceland feels like he’s gloating, like he’s managed to do something big and impossible that England has failed at. He knows his bitterness at being invaded hasn’t subsided, but he hasn’t had many outlets with which to express it apart from staying in his room. Not that England would know or care—Iceland hasn’t seen or heard him in the house since the day he arrived.

“Well,” says Hong Kong, “you’ll have to show me.”

“I don’t have any paper,” says Iceland. “There wasn’t time to pack it.”

“And paper’s being rationed here, too,” says Hong Kong. “We’d have to use scraps. But I have an idea.”

Hong Kong gestures for the two of them to break from the stream of people headed to what Iceland presumes is the market. Iceland obeys, and they walk along a side street as cars whizz by beside them. They turn after a minute or two into a shady, leafy abyss.

“This is the park,” says Hong Kong. It’s small, barely the size of a block, and if Iceland squints through the trees he can see the buildings on the other side of the square. But there are children screaming and playing, and there are benches in the shade.

“Is it much like home?” Hong Kong asks when Iceland doesn’t respond.

“The trees at home aren’t nearly this big,” says Iceland. Hong Kong nods silently, and Iceland realizes belatedly that he might have hurt Hong Kong’s feelings. He supposes he was only trying to help. “But,” he adds, “they remind me of Norway.”

Hong Kong nods with more energy. “You find a bench,” he says as they cross the street. “I’ll be right back.”

Iceland finds them a bench about midway down the meandering path of the park. Three girls are playing hopscotch etched out on the dirt path, but there’s no one directly in front of them. He sets down the bags he’s been asked to carry and waits for a few minutes. Every time a breeze crosses his skin, he breathes a little deeper.

“Here you are,” says Hong Kong from behind him. He plants himself on the bench besides Iceland and hands him one of two red pillars of ice on a stick. Under his arm, and about as long, is a stick which he sets leaning against the bench.

“Have you ever had an ice lolly before?” he asks Iceland. Iceland takes his with a nod and examines it.

“I had mine made of snow,” he says. “It melted in the bowl when we poured the fruit juice on it. Normally I just held my tongue out for snowflakes. As a boy,” he adds, though he’s lying. He does it to this day, when no one is looking.

“I guess you get a lot of snow, then.”

Iceland raises an eyebrow at Hong Kong. “...*Iceland.*”

Hong Kong snorts and tries to look embarrassed, but after a second he fully laughs. The sight of it stirs something in Iceland, something light that flutters in his stomach. He chalks it up to surprise at the first laughter he’s heard in days, and takes a lick of his ice lolly. The flavor isn’t as strong as he’s tasted before—he suspects rationing—but it’s pleasant and appropriate for the bits of sun that peek through the leaves and the clouds.

“Fair point,” Hong Kong concedes. His smile hasn’t fully left him yet. He takes a lick of his ice lolly belatedly, just before it starts to drip. “Oh, and by the way, if Marie asks, the market was out of cherries.”

“Was it?” Iceland wonders how Hong Kong could have checked it so quickly. It’s a block away.

“For all she knows, it was.” Hong Kong lifts up the ice lolly, and Iceland belatedly realizes that he’s used some of the household’s grocery money to pay for these. In a way, the fact dampens the pleasure of eating the lolly. For a few minutes, Iceland was willing to forget that he was in a country that survived by rationing.

“We shouldn’t lie to her next time,” says Iceland.

“No, we shouldn’t.” Hong Kong looks at the ground pensively. “But it’s nice to be able to, from time to time.”



The two of them lick their ice lollies some more. Iceland tries to be civilized about it by catching the dripping parts, but eventually has to bite off part of it to make it more manageable. Hong Kong keeps sneaking glances at him.

“So why did you bring the stick?” he asks Hong Kong.

“Ah, right,” says Hong Kong. He lifts it up and hands it to Iceland. “Show me these special letters of yours.” He gestures to the dirt ground.

Iceland looks at the girls and their makeshift hopscotch grid, and then etches an *eth* and a *thorn* in the dirt.

Hong Kong whistles. “They look awfully similar.”

“You can tell them apart better in lowercase,” Iceland says, and he draws their corresponding pairs. *Thorn* looks similar in both upper- and lowercase, like a combination of a “p” and a “b”, but *eth* resembles more of a wavy cursive “d”. “England used to have these too, you know.”

“I doubt I could write those properly.”

“It’s not so different,” says Iceland. He etches the lowercase versions more slowly. “Like this, see?”

“Let me try.”

Iceland gives Hong Kong the stick, and Hong Kong slowly, painstakingly follows his movements. He forgets to add the small mark running through the top of *eth*.

“You forgot something,” says Iceland, and he gestures to his own drawing. Hong Kong frowns and adds a line that’s much too long.

“Not like that,” says Iceland. He leans over so that his right hand is gripping the stick just in front of where Hong Kong’s is. “Just a small line, see. Like crossing a ‘t’.”

Hong Kong nods, and Iceland can feel it as well as see it. He realizes that his shoulder is pressed against Hong Kong’s, that his pinky finger is brushing against Hong Kong’s grip. He lets go and trades the ice lolly back to his right hand, and takes another slurp of it before it melts.

Hong Kong studies his work for another moment. His own ice lolly is dripping onto his closed hand, but he doesn’t seem to notice. After a moment, he looks up at Iceland with a raised eyebrow. “You’re not going to believe me when I show you how to write Cantonese.”

“Oh? It’s more complicated than *eth*?”

Hong Kong grins. “Wait and see.” He rubs away his and Iceland’s writing with his foot and begins to sketch.

It takes two hours for the sticky red residue of the ice lollies to wipe off from their hands without water, at which point they finally leave the park to pick up the groceries. Marie scolds them for being late until she sees the guilty yet knowing looks passed between the two of them. She rolls her eyes and starts unpacking the groceries for dinner.

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Two days after the grocery trip, Iceland is bored. He’ll have read his book for the fourth time since

he came to England, and this after having read as slowly as possible and murmuring the words to himself with as much drama as he did in the old days. The bedroom is as gray as it was the first day he arrived, the window just as dingy, the walls just as devoid of anything but wallpaper.

He decides to find Hong Kong.

He means to start on the ground floor, but in the bedroom just below his, he sees an open door. He can only partly see into the room, as the door is open by only a foot or two, but he pauses at the top of the stairs and glimpses through it all the same.

He sees only the knee of someone sitting on the bed. The room is much darker than the one upstairs.

“We’re doing everything we can,” says a voice from inside. Hong Kong. “But you know the papers wouldn’t report her. She’s classified information.”

“She’s my *sister*.”

Oh. It’s Slovakia. Iceland has only seen Slovakia at the occasional meeting whenever Denmark has let him attend, but Slovakia and his sister Czech always appeared together.

Hong Kong told him that Germany had Czech.

“I know,” says Hong Kong. “I’ve asked England, and—”

“When? When did you ask England?”

“...Nine days ago.”

“The same day Iceland came?”

So Slovakia does know he’s here. Belgium must be giving him updates as well as his meals.

“The same day, yes,” Hong Kong says. “He’s been in meetings ever since, though. He stays at Downing Street more often than not.”

“And he’s *sworn* that the minute he hears anything about Beata—”

“The minute he knows,” Hong Kong says. “I promise. When I know, you’ll know.”

Slovakia sighs. The knee on the bed shifts. “I just want her to be safe. Not even with me. Just safe.”

“Me too,” murmurs Hong Kong.

“You don’t have any sisters,” says Slovakia. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

For a moment, silence. Then Hong Kong stands up. “I’ll be helping Belgium in the garden,” he says. “You’re welcome to join.” He steps to the door considerably more quietly than Iceland could ever manage, and shuts it behind him. He makes instant eye contact with Iceland, but doesn’t greet him with more than a nod. He brushes past Iceland and leads the way to the first floor.

He steps to the foyer to pick up the mail from where it fell from the slot. “I do have a sister,” he mutters.

“Why didn’t you tell him, then?” asks Iceland.

“Because he doesn’t want sympathy.” Hong Kong straightens and looks at Iceland. “Just like you.”

“...Did I insult you?” Iceland wracks his memories for something he could have said. Belgium and Luxembourg have been kind enough, and even England made efforts, but Hong Kong has so far been his strongest ally in this house. He doesn’t want to lose that relationship so soon, especially with someone who shares his bedroom and could smother him in his sleep.

“It’s not an insult,” says Hong Kong, “just a fact. And unlike Slovakia, you’ll at least *take* sympathy.”

Iceland isn’t sure how to respond. Hong Kong is bitter about something, but he seems to lose his tenseness over the next few seconds.

“The garden invitation is for you too,” he says to Iceland. “I’m sure Belgium would like a break to play cards with her brother.”

Iceland studies Hong Kong. Whatever is bothering Hong Kong—about Slovakia, about Iceland, or about his own sister—he doesn’t seem to want to think about it anymore.

“Of course,” Iceland says. “Lead the way.”

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Over the course of a month, Iceland becomes used to quarantine.

It’s not the best word for their situation, but “seclusion”, “isolation”, and any other word he can think of all imply the absence of Hong Kong. Yes, he shares this house with half a dozen other people, but Hong Kong is the one who makes him feel less alone in it. They garden together after breakfast, which transitions into an hour of reading the newspaper, with Hong Kong breaking down the more difficult English words for Iceland and scanning for information about Iceland’s home or family. Lunch leads to rest and an afternoon of hobbies or chores, except for one or two afternoons where England returns and then Hong Kong is at his call and Iceland is left alone in their room.

Today is one of those days. As usual, Iceland has returned to his book, whispering the words just to hear his own language. Hong Kong’s curiosity about the book has mounted, but not enough to break Iceland’s fragile trust in him by asking before he’s ready. As a compromise, Iceland saves it under his pillow for times of Hong Kong’s absence.

The time alone draws to a close not fifteen minutes after he started; Hong Kong is climbing the stairs to their attic room.

“You need to speak to England,” he says. The sobriety of his dark eyes makes Iceland close his book.

“Why?”

“It’s best you hear it from him.”

Iceland eyes Hong Kong for any hint of the news waiting for him two floors down in England’s study. Hong Kong shakes his head and gestures him to the door, but sits on his bed across as Iceland stands up.

“You’re not coming?”

Hong Kong raises an eyebrow. "I don't think you want me to."

A weight settles in Iceland's stomach. So it's bad news, then.

He leaves their room without closing the door and descends the stairs. When he approaches the study, he feels the urge to knock or announce his presence somehow, but the door is open and the best he can think of is to stand in the doorway.

England takes several seconds more to read through his telegrams before he notices Iceland's presence.

"Iceland," he says. He looks he's trying to smile. "I hope you've settled in by now."

"Well enough," Iceland says.

"Do sit down," England says, gesturing to a sofa behind his desk. Iceland takes the very edge of the sofa closest to the door, and England swivels his chair to face him. There's still a telegram in his hands.

"I imagine you'll want to be the first to hear this, before the papers report it tomorrow," England starts. "It's about your brother."

"Which one?"

England blinks. "Norway, of course."

"Nothing of Denmark?"

"I wasn't aware you considered him a sibling. Considering your demeanors and whatnot."

"He raised me for longer than Norway did."

"Yes, well. One forgets these things when so much time has passed."

Iceland gets the sense England is avoiding discussing the Viking days and the Danelaw established in his land. To England, it might be nothing more than a childhood memory, one he thinks he's outgrown and can afford to lose. Centuries of hospitality tradition prevent Iceland from finding out.

"Your brother's royal family and government have been evacuated," England starts in, "by the HMS Devonshire."

"I beg your pardon." Iceland learned this phrase from Hong Kong in the marketplace.

"Evacuated?"

"Yes. They're no longer safe in Norway, so my navy has seen fit to transport them to safety here in London. Buckingham Palace," England adds, as if Iceland knows where or what that is. "They will be guests of his majesty the King."

Iceland cocks his head. The way Hong Kong spoke to him, this was meant to be bad news. He's still waiting for it.

"Thank you," Iceland starts formally, "for your hospitality. Both toward myself and Norway. I imagine much effort has been put into assuring our people's safety."

"Fifteen hundred England men and three warships," England murmurs bitterly. He then looks up at Iceland in momentary embarrassment. "Nothing the papers won't tell you about, I'm sure. Lad,

you're right that quite a lot has been sacrificed for your people. But I won't have you thinking that I don't have a heart for your family."

"That's..." Iceland feels a sudden swelling of gratitude, and his formality melts away. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Thank me only when we reach the end of this bloody war." England nods perfunctorily. "I suppose you'll wish to greet the ship when they arrive."

"I don't believe the current royal family has met me yet. It would be a privilege, but really I'd..." His eyes become cloudy. He's felt so anxious, try as he might to deny it, and the possibility of it coming to an end overtakes him. "I want to see Norway."

"Ah. Oh, dear."

"What?"

"I said only that Norway's royal family and his government were evacuated. As for your brother himself, though... Well." England frowns. "We haven't found him."

Iceland inhales once, sharply. His eyes swim for a new reason now. His brother, still missing. Of course. Of *course* Norway would see his people to safety ahead of himself. Never mind that Iceland has been waiting here for a month—a *month*—not even daring to put a name to his hope. But he knows it now: reunion. Iceland has viewed this month in England's home as nothing more than a temporary stop on the way to his family. His family, a thin channel away and now further out of reach than they've ever been.

"Where is he?" Iceland demands. His voice croaks, and he's ashamed of himself for it. He's not a child, but he *needs his brothers*.

"I would say he went to Sweden," says England quietly, "but his government has announced that they would arrest and detain—er"—he recalls Iceland's weak grasp of formal English—"they would stop the Norwegian king from crossing the border. I imagine that rule applies as much to Norway as to his ruler. As it is, it's possible that Norway might join Denmark in German custody."

"*Danmörk*," Iceland breathes. He can't speak around the lump in his throat, as large as a boulder, and he digs his fingernails into his palms to prevent tears from slipping out. He can't cry, not among the likes of England, who looks at him with sympathy but no comprehension of his grief. England can hardly stand his own brothers, but Iceland has never in his life gone without contact with his family. He's only been self-governing since the end of the Great War, and *that* war never stole his family like this new, crueler terror.

England leans forward with his elbows on his thighs, and clasps his hands together. He looks as if a heavy weight has hunched his back. "I'll do what I can to see them safe," he murmurs, "but that may be very little. For God's sake, I can't even reach *France*." His head drops, and his shoulders give one great heave of a sigh.

The sight of England, as lost in grief as Iceland, is the breaking point. Iceland stands from the sofa and sprints, not upstairs, but downstairs and into the garden. He falls to his knees in the dark dirt and begs, *begs* himself not to cry.

*If they're gone...* He can't even finish the sentence. If Norway and Denmark are in German hands, Iceland won't see them again until the length of the war, and perhaps even longer. The sheer horror of that thought—of being, in all his years of isolation, truly *alone*—brings forth his tears.

Each sob wracks through him in crashing waves. He doesn't know how long he sits there, his head in his hands and the heels of his palms stemming the flow of his tears.

He hears the sound of the garden gate closing, and looks up to see dusk. He doesn't bother to look behind him at the approaching footsteps. It's probably England, ready to offer meaningless platitudes. As if France or whomever England grieves for could match Iceland's fear and loss.

Someone kneels beside him a foot or so away. It's the same person who's spent every morning in this dirt with him, silently tending the garden.

Hong Kong clears his throat.

Iceland doesn't acknowledge him, but in Hong Kong's lap, he spies something familiar. Before he can gather himself enough to comment, Hong Kong begins reading:

*“Hljóðs bið ek allar helgar kindir,  
meiri ok minni mögu Heimdallar;  
viltu, at ek, Valföðr! vel framtelja forn spjöll fíra,  
þau er fremst um man.”*

It's the worst pronunciation Iceland has ever heard. There's too much emphasis on the consonants, and the intonation is so wrong as to be incomprehensible. Still, even before he can realize it, he snorts.

Hong Kong, undeterred, starts the next stanza.

Iceland sits and allows him to read aloud from the book he keeps under his pillow—the book he and Hong Kong both pretend isn't there. His language may be being butchered, but it's still the greatest source of comfort he could receive in this house, his apparently permanent home. The thought of it draws more tears from him, but he blocks out the worst of his thoughts and replaces them with Hong Kong's voice.

Hong Kong finishes the poem and doesn't start the next. He and Iceland sit there in the garden, listening to other families make dinner and chatter with each other. One house is playing the Glenn Miller Orchestra on the radio through an open window.

Hong Kong hands Iceland the book without looking at him. “You don't have to tell me what it is.”

“You've said.” Iceland's voice is quieter than he'd like it to be.

“I just thought... It's what you turn to when you need comfort.”

Iceland grasps the book against his chest, not unlike when he first arrived at this house. “It's my people's stories. In English, you'd call it the Poetic Edda.”

“Edda?”

“Just the name of the collection.”

“I'd like to know more.” Hong Kong looks around them at the vegetable patch and the sparse flowers. “Maybe not here and now.”

Iceland considers him. As proud as he is of his people's mythology, Hong Kong has almost none of

the context he would need to understand it. These are stories of the old gods, stories he shared with his brothers for centuries. They shared a proud oral tradition—one they've nearly lost, with the arrival of Christianity and the spread of writing.

It's something he could stand to remember.

And, as he looks at Hong Kong, he realizes it's something he could afford to share.

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"Alright, so. The king of the gods is Odin."

"Interesting name." Hong Kong's face doesn't betray any amusement, but Iceland hears it in his voice.

"If you think that's interesting, just wait until we reach the giants."

They're sitting side by side on Iceland's bed, the Poetic Edda in his lap. By unspoken agreement, they forewent their usual news reading and went upstairs together. Iceland knows what's in the news: the arrival of Haakon VII and his family. He also knows what's not in the news: where his brothers are, and how they're faring under Nazi rule.

"What kind of king is he?"

Iceland forces his mind back into this room. "What do you mean?"

"If he's king, I imagine he sits on a throne and makes announcements and the like."

"Is that some Chinese image you have?"

"English too. Emperors and kings aren't that different."

"Odin is. He has a hall, but he doesn't spend much time there."

"Most people don't." Hong Kong tilts his chin out the door and to the narrow hallway leading to the stairs.

"Not that kind of hall. It's more like a home." Iceland gestures to their bedroom. "This could be your hall."

"Yours too, though."

"I'm a guest."

The thought gives them both pause. Iceland examines their beds, each pressed against opposite sides of the room. The beds don't match exactly—Iceland's has a metal frame while Hong Kong's is made of wood—but they're roughly the same size and with identical sheets. It was always a standard in Norse culture for hosts to treat their guests as well as their own, if not better. And though he couldn't possibly know it, Hong Kong has met that expectation.

"You're a guest of England," Hong Kong concludes. "I am too, in a sense."

"You're a colony."

"A long-term guest."

“A guest who collects his mail? And hosts the other countries?”

“Of course. He trusts me to run his household.”

“That sounds like a slave.”

Hong Kong narrows his eyes at Iceland. Iceland worries he’s overstepped some boundary.

“A lot of these stories have slaves,” he says, gesturing to the Edda. “It’s not such a bad thing. Some of the slaves go on adventures with Thor.”

“Thor?” Hong Kong accepts the reversion to the old topic.

“Not yet. Let’s start with Odin. He’s not the kind of king you think he is. He’s wise, but not wise like Solomon. He works more in secrets. He sacrificed one of his eyes to gain wisdom from the well of Mimir, and that’s not even the worst of what he’s done for knowledge.”

“Why does he care so much about secrets?”

“I’m not sure. He keeps them as much as he collects them. He wanders the land in disguise so he can learn even more of them.”

Despite himself, an image appears in his mind: Norway, a hood masking his face, a walking stick in hand, slipping through a mountain path. Norway always had some deeper connection to his land. While Finland hid in his woods, and Sweden chopped them down to use the timber, and Denmark had few woods to speak of, Norway largely let his own trees be. When Iceland would visit, he would guide Iceland through his forests, holding his hand every time he was frightened of the towering trees, silently acknowledging the spirits they both could see.

Hong Kong clears his throat.

“Thor,” Iceland startles. “You asked about Thor.”

“Right.”

“Thor is the son of Odin, and his complete opposite. Odin is mysterious, but Thor is kind. Our people named more places after Thor than Odin, because Thor is our protector.”

“But Odin is the king?”

“That’s how it is. Was.” Iceland frowns. “These stories are old. And since we became Christian, they’ve been hard for me to remember.”

Hong Kong nods sagely. “You should meet China. His history is so long he sometimes forgets which dynasty came first.”

“Does he forget his own gods?”

“He doesn’t forget so much as choose to acknowledge them at different times.”

Iceland runs his finger over one of the pages of the Edda. “I understand that.”

“That’s not the original, is it?” Hong Kong nods to the book.

“Oh, no. This was done by a printing press. The original is with Denmark.” A sudden lump forms in Iceland’s throat. What will the Germans do to his Edda? The Poetic Edda, preserved in a series



of texts called the Codex Regius, are some of the only written work of his and his brothers' gods. With their loss, he has only inferior printings and his own memory.

"Thor," Hong Kong prods.

"Thor. He's enormous. He carries a hammer in one hand, and he uses it to defend the humans and Aesir—"

"Aesir?"

"The gods, more or less. Thor and Odin are Aesir. There are also the Vanir, but they joined with the Aesir to become gods too."

Hong Kong's brow furrows.

"Never mind. Thor protects everyone. When he's not killing giants, though, he's...kind. He laughs loudly, and he can outdrink anyone. Everyone wants to eat at his table."

"He must have great stories."

"Good stories, yes. He's not much of a poet, though. For poetry, you'd want to speak to Odin, if you could find him."

"I get the sense poetry is important."

"What you read to me in the garden was a poem. Poetry is how we shared these stories. They weren't written, except in the Edda—we shared them out loud. If you could do it well, you were almost as respected as a warrior."

"Could you?"

"Me?" Iceland considers. "I wasn't the best, but my people were. In the old days, it was a sign of status for a king to have an Icelandic poet in his keep."

Hong Kong looks impressed. Iceland feels a spark of pride which soon fades into an ember. Those were the old days, when trade and exchange were strong. Things have changed so much.

"I remember," Iceland murmurs, "when Denmark brought me to his court. He always introduced me with such pride. It didn't matter whether I was meeting a king or one of his servants. He showed me to everyone as if I were a poet and a warrior both."

Hong Kong is silent for a moment. "Was Denmark a poet?"

Iceland scoffs. "Denmark was a warrior. He and Thor were nearly one and the same, except that Denmark had a battle axe instead of a hammer."

"He killed giants?"

"He led our people. At meals he sat at the head of the table, acting like he was a king. But really we knew he just wanted to drink and eat and share stories. He had more strategy in his brain than Thor would, but he never announced a plan without talking to Norway first."

"Where was Norway at these meals?"

"Beside Denmark. Or beside me. I was so surprised to hear from his kings that without me or Denmark present, it was hard to find him. Somehow he always knew when one of us had come,

and he came out from the woods or the mountains to greet us.”

“Like Odin.”

Iceland examines Hong Kong. “How so?”

Hong Kong shrugs. “He wouldn’t be much of a king if he didn’t know when to come out of hiding.”

“I suppose so.”

“So you have a Thor brother and an Odin brother. Who does that make you?”

It’s an innocent question, but one Iceland doesn’t know how to answer. To buy himself a moment, he looks across the room to Hong Kong’s empty bed. The wall is bare, but the head of the bed is pressed against the side of a wardrobe. Iceland didn’t notice it before, but there’s a single paper pinned to the wardrobe, so that when Hong Kong is asleep it hangs above his head. Craning his head, he can see the hand-drawn image of a girl. With her dark hair and eyes, plus the tropical flower tucked behind one ear, she looks like she’s from Hong Kong’s home.

He’s about to ask about her, but Marie chooses that moment to call them to lunch.

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“I don’t know how you stand this heat.”

It’s July, and Iceland and Hong Kong are weeding in the garden like usual. Hong Kong looks over at Iceland with an expression of bemusement.

“This is hot to you?”

“How many times do I have to say *ice. Land.*”

“The number of times you bring it up, I think you’re starting to melt.”

“I hope not.” Iceland wishes he had a better retort, but nothing comes to him. He wipes his brow, hoping that gesture will get rid of any sweating-ice jokes Hong Kong might think of.

When Hong Kong reaches for his forehead, he freezes. In contrast to his own sweaty fingers inside his gloves, Hong Kong’s are cool and dry. He’s taken off his gardening gloves and touches Iceland’s forehead with such a decisive stroke that Iceland forgets for a moment to be hot.

After a second that seems much longer than it is, Hong Kong withdraws his hand and wipes it on his gardening apron. “Dirt,” he explains, slipping his glove back on.

Iceland takes longer than he would like to nod. They turn back to the dandelion patches and forage and yank for a quiet few minutes.

“What kind of summers do you have in Hong Kong?” Iceland finally asks. “If this is such a paradise for you.”

“Dreadful,” Hong Kong says without missing a beat. “We’re much further south than England, and our humidity is twice as much. An English July is like a Hong Kong April.”

“I can only imagine the sweat when your summer comes.”

“I never said I sweat.”

Iceland pauses and looks up at Hong Kong. At first he looks as inexpressive as always, but before he can turn his head, Iceland can see him hiding a smile.

Iceland throws a clump of dandelion roots at him. “You liar.”

“No, I’m serious. Haven’t you heard that Asian people can’t sweat?”

“If you keep going on like this, I might actually believe you.”

“Alright, alright, I lied. I have to keep your good opinion of me.”

The comment thuds between them, heavier than Hong Kong probably meant it to be.

“...I do have a good opinion of you,” says Iceland. “Sweat jokes aside.”

Hong Kong doesn’t look at him. His lips press together, as if the weed he’s pulling is particularly difficult, but it comes out of the soil without struggle. “Good,” he concludes. And then he adds: “I like you too, you know.”

Only in that moment does Iceland realize he’s been wondering just that. They spend so much time together that he worries he’s forcing himself on Hong Kong. But without his presence, he’s left with a house full of nations he barely knows, a sea away from his home and another sea from his family. The newspapers bring nothing but gloom, and even London itself feels oppressing on the worst days. There have been mornings that he can’t get out of bed until he sees Hong Kong do it himself.

“You don’t have to,” Iceland murmurs.

“Don’t have to what?” Hong Kong sits back on his heels. It must be some Asian thing; Iceland has never managed to mimic his posture. “Like you?”

“You’ve tolerated me and kept me busy, and I’m grateful for that.” Iceland keeps his eyes on the soil, regardless that he’s found all the weeds he can for the day. “But you don’t have to spend so much time with me if you don’t want to. I’ve already stolen your room.”

“No you haven’t.”

“What?”

“That’s not my room.”

Iceland reconsiders the bare walls of the attic bedroom—*their* attic bedroom. “Where is your room?”

“England typically lets his colonies stay at their own homes. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India—they’re all so far away that it doesn’t make sense to force us all to stay in London. But for those of us here on business, we have dedicated rooms closer to Parliament.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Officially, I’m managing the governments in exile. Sure, we colonies could give up our rooms, but we needed an anonymous place, and England’s home here on south Thames is much less known.”

“What about unofficially?”

“Unofficially.” For a moment, Hong Kong turns his face to the sky. “Maybe I need your company as much as you need mine.”

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Summer passes with Iceland’s stories. He can’t translate the Poetic Edda into English, but he slowly conveys to Hong Kong the names of the gods and some of their more remarkable stories. If Heimdall’s steady, stern demeanor reminds Iceland of Sweden—still neutral, still baffling in Iceland’s eyes for his refusal to help their Nordic brothers—he says nothing. If he describes a god of spring, not taken seriously until he proves vicious in battle, and he once says “Finland” instead of “Frey”, Hong Kong doesn’t mention it again.

They share stories in the afternoon, but come dinner, they're thrust back into reality.

“I still think we should go to the Tube,” Luxembourg says at the dinner table one night in early September. Iceland has heard this argument a few times, so he continues eating his butterless potatoes and watches it play out.

“It’s irresponsible,” replies Hong Kong mildly. “We can’t let people see where we’re going and coming from. The market is risk enough.”

“I’d say I know more about the Germans than you do, and I haven’t seen a single one on our street.”

“As it should be.”

“As if you could tell a German from a Brit,” Belgium intervenes. “Their royal lines tangled so long ago.”

“What does that have to do with this?” asks Luxembourg. “All I mean is that we may be here for protection, but this house can’t protect us from German bombs.”

“What need do we have for protection?” asks Belgium. “We’ll only be disincorporated. Best to leave the safest places to those who would truly die.”

*Disincorporated.* Iceland hasn’t heard the English term, but all nations know the concept. Norway taught him their word for it long ago, when Iceland asked where Denmark had gone after a particularly vicious raid. Nations can’t die so long as their people live, explained Norway, but their bodies can’t overcome every wound. When they suffer something that would kill a human, their body fades and reappears in their homeland, back at the place where they first awoke.

Iceland, still a small child, didn’t believe Norway at first. As time passed and Denmark failed to return from the battlefield, Iceland came to think that Denmark had instead taken one of the boats and left them behind. Unscratched and in good humor, Denmark caught up with their camp in Bergen several months later, and Iceland wouldn’t talk to him for the rest of the afternoon until he’d apologized sufficiently.

Even to this day, Iceland hasn’t seen a disincorporation, let alone experienced one for himself. He’s asked his brothers how it feels, but Denmark made light of it and Norway only shook his head.

Looking around the table, everyone except Hong Kong exchanges a grim glance. By definition, disincorporation won’t kill them. But it will return them home, essentially delivering them to the

German forces they're hiding from in the first place.

"Besides," adds Belgium, "there's no guarantee London will be attacked."

"The air raid practice sirens beg to differ," says Luxembourg. "And you've heard the reports of Barcelona and Shanghai as much as I have."

"Fine, then let's assume London is next. Even if we could reach the Tube in time for the bombs to fall, what people would we be pushing out to make room for us?"

"They're *English*," says Luxembourg. "Our capture in exchange for a few people who aren't even ours?"

"I think that's an appropriate place to stop," interjects Hong Kong. "No one needs to die at the cost of anyone else. The cellar will work as well as the Tube. We're lucky to have a cellar, in fact."

Belgium frowns. "That moldering room where I keep my preserves? I don't expect much of it."

"You can expect just enough."

He sounds so firm that Iceland believes him on principle. But just a few nights later, his faith is put to the test.

The air raid sirens blare in late afternoon. Hong Kong and Iceland are in the parlor, respectively drawing and reading an English book. Belgium hustles across the foyer from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I don't think this is practice," she announces.

Me neither." Hong Kong stands from his chair. "Get Luxembourg and Slovakia. We'll meet you in the cellar."

Iceland realizes he's part of the "we" only when Hong Kong reaches the foyer and turns toward him expectantly. "The Edda," Iceland says.

"It's not the original," Hong Kong counters.

"It's the only copy I have."

Hong Kong tilts his head up, as if he can see their room through the ceiling. "Get it quickly."

Iceland sprints up the stairs, past the second floor—England's room, his study—and the third—the others' rooms—to the attic. The afternoon sun looks so bizarrely calm until he peers out the window and sees distant specks on the horizon. Airplanes.

He grabs the Edda from under his pillow and takes the steps two at a time. After so many months of sitting and waiting, the action leaves him out of breath, and he's panting when he reaches the last steps, underneath the foyer's staircase. Hong Kong is waiting at the door for him.

"Took you long enough," he says. He tries to tease, but concern leaks through. Iceland speeds past him, and Hong Kong closes the door behind him and seals it with a heavy bar Iceland didn't know was there.

Actually, he thinks, he has never seen much of the cellar at all. He's come down once or twice with vegetables from the garden, but he's never stayed long enough to get a good look.

The small staircase leads down to two towering shelves that form a small hallway to the other side of the room. Belgium and Luxembourg sit beside each other on a bench at the far end of the cellar, legs pressed together as if drawing strength through contact. Against the furthest wall is a cot on which Slovakia lies facing the wall. Across from Belgium and Luxembourg, making up the third wall, is an empty bench half covered in drop cloths.

Hong Kong ushers Iceland to take a seat there, and the five nations sit in silence.

“Well,” says Belgium finally. “This does feel a little anticlimactic.”

Immediately following her words comes the rumble of the first bombs.

“I don’t suppose there’s a spare radio,” murmurs Slovakia. Iceland strains to hear him from his position against the wall.

“Just the one upstairs,” says Belgium. She stands and steps to the shelf beside her bench. In the midst of jars of preservatives and crates of whatever else England keeps, Iceland spies a small first aid kit, a lantern, a few books (their spines invisible to Iceland), and a deck of cards. Belgium plucks the cards from the shelf as another bomb distantly drops.

“Do any of you know Piquet?” she asks.

“At a time like this?” Luxembourg demands. His arms are crossed across his chest.

“I can’t think of a better time, can you?” Belgium glares at her brother, and then catches Iceland’s eyes. Iceland is surprised; she normally defers to Hong Kong. But when he looks beside him, he sees Hong Kong’s head leaned back and his eyes closed. His breathing is steady, but his face is tense.

With a lingering glance, Iceland turns back to Belgium. “I don’t know that game, but you can show me.” He slides off the bench and onto the floor. His shoulder rests against Hong Kong’s knee.

After a wary moment, Luxembourg mirrors Iceland. Together with Belgium, they pass some unknown amount of time playing games from the European continent. Hong Kong opens his eyes on occasion to watch, but makes no comment. It seems he, along with Slovakia, has become dead to the world. Unlike Slovakia, though, this is the first time he’s done so in the time Iceland has known him.

Iceland guesses it to be two hours into their stay—around sunset—when the closest bomb yet rattles the single lamp above them. Everyone except Slovakia raises their head to watch the light swing, casting elongated shadows around the room.

Wordlessly, Hong Kong slips off the bench and sits cross-legged beside Iceland.

“Tell them the stories,” he says.

Iceland double-takes. All summer, the stories of the Edda have never left their room. It’s been an unspoken agreement, but an agreement all the same.

A second bomb explodes so close to their house that Iceland feels it in his chest. The lamp swings wildly, and Hong Kong shuts his eyes and ducks his head as if doing so will steady the light. “Tell *me* the stories,” he murmurs.

Iceland’s heart starts to race. But no, for Hong Kong’s sake, he has to keep calm. Hong Kong has been so cool, so unflappable, and it’s time for Iceland to return the favor however he can.

“What stories?” asks Luxembourg. He and Belgium are looking between them.

“The stories of my people.” From the bench behind him, Iceland grabs the Poetic Edda. He’s reviewed the stories so many times that he only needs the weight of it in his lap. “Hong Kong and I have been talking about them.”

Luxembourg raises an eyebrow. Belgium nods like she expects nothing less of the two, although she couldn’t possibly have heard their afternoon conversations.

In the distance, a whistling sound draws closer. It culminates in a *boom* that rattles the jars on the upper shelves.

“Tell us.”

Iceland turns over to see Slovakia looking straight at him. His gray eyes stare into Iceland’s. He repeats, “Tell us what you told him.”

Iceland takes a breath. Talking to Hong Kong has felt just like that: talking. These three other nations, however, make an audience. Centuries of long-forgotten oration rise from the dust in his mind.

His people are poets.

“We tell these stories in nights like this,” Iceland begins, although it’s only barely night by his guess. “When the light is dim and the thunder echoes. We tell stories of Odin, king of the gods. He’s known by everyone, and he knows everything. I’ll tell you how that came to be.”

He keeps his voice low and steady. Even through the rumbles of the bombs, his pace remains even. When he finishes one tale of Odin, he finds himself tired, but the three captive pairs of eyes around him press him to go on.

Beside him, Hong Kong closes his eyes again. He leans his back against the bench, but one knee rests against Iceland’s.

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They fall asleep there on the floor and wake to the all-clear siren. When they emerge, the clock on the parlor mantle informs them that it’s well past midnight. By unspoken agreement, they forego dinner to retreat to their beds.

Another siren calls after lunch the next day, and they return to the cellar. Belgium doesn’t take out the cards, and none of them sit on the floor. They’re too tired for games. Slovakia lies on his cot but faces the others this time.

“You say there are Thor stories too,” he says to Iceland.

Iceland nods.

“Personally,” says Belgium, “I want to know more about the world Odin describes in...oh, the tale where he pretended to be a beggar and was tortured.”

“*Grímnismál*,” Iceland says.

“I suppose. Something about how the world is a tree?”

“But also there are many worlds,” adds Luxembourg. “Full of elves and dwarves and whatnot.”

“That’s true,” says Iceland.

The others stare at him expectantly.

Hong Kong nudges his shoulder. “Tell them about Oog-dra-sill.”

“Yggdrasil.” Iceland turns to the others. “The world tree.”

Thus begins another day that turns to night, full of stories Iceland has kept to himself for longer than he can remember. The others listen and become more comfortable with interrupting to ask questions. But their eyes are tired; Iceland doubts that they would interact so much if they were in any other circumstance. Nonetheless, he allows himself to feel pride not for their curiosity, but for the stories he knows and the strength they give him.

The air raids continue a third day, and then a fourth, and then a week. The radio calls it the Blitz, a shortening of the German “blitzkrieg,” the swift attacks that come like lightning. Slowly, slowly they grow used to the sound of the bombs and carry on a normal life outside the cellar. Their rotations to the marketplace help: the English are surprisingly resilient and even cheerful, even when they’ve walked past houses reduced to rubble just to do their shopping. Belgium in particular picks up on their jauntiness—once she comes home to announce that at least today hasn’t been as “blitzy” as the one before.

The fifteenth of September is the worst. The radio has announced that major factories and shipping infrastructure have already been destroyed—on market days, Iceland has even seen the smoke on the Thames—but the Germans don’t appear done with the city yet. The mood that day is somber. They haven’t had a full day without an attack in a week, and the planes seem to draw closer each day.

“Why weren’t we sent to the countryside?” Luxembourg groans and rubs his eyes.

“There aren’t many placements available,” Hong Kong answers.

“The personification of England can’t free up his own countryside?”

“I don’t know,” Hong Kong snaps. The room falls silent. He’s taken his default position, sitting on the bench with the crown of his head against the wall.

“I’m not Christian,” Hong Kong murmurs, “but this feels like the end of the world.”

Iceland blinks. He looks down at his lap, where the Edda rests, and then back at Hong Kong. “This can’t be the end of the world,” he says slowly, carefully. He’s trying not to make Hong Kong more upset, but this could backfire horribly. “Baldr hasn’t died yet.”

Hong Kong opens one eye. “Baldr.”

Iceland raises the Edda. “It’s all here. There’s a sequence that leads up to the end of the world, and we haven’t even started it.”

He feels childish even as he says it. The others have entertained him so far—or maybe he’s entertained them, he hopes—but everyone here apart from Hong Kong is some shade of Christian. Stories of gods and giants are one thing, but announcing that his “pagan” stories hold the true end of the world may cross a line.



That's the beauty of Hong Kong's foreignness, though: he humors him.

"So tell me about Baldr," Hong Kong says quietly. He doesn't even try to suggest "us". The story is for him.

"Baldr," Iceland says, "is the best of the gods."

"We haven't heard anything of him so far," says Slovakia.

"I think he was a son of Odin," Belgium adds.

"He is," says Iceland. "We don't hear much of him because the best are not always the most noteworthy. But he was good and fair and handsome. He was like the sun, bringing light and protection, and everyone loved him. Everyone except one."

"Loki," mutters Luxembourg. The whole room knows of Loki: cunning and tricky, opposite of Thor, blood brother to Odin. Half the stories of the gods begin with his tricks, and most of them end with his clever solutions. He stirs the pot, as Belgium says; he causes chaos, counters Luxembourg. Iceland has tried not to pass judgment on Loki himself, and he can't pretend it's because he's an impartial narrator. Loki is something of a shame in Norse culture—necessary for his skills, but scorned for how he breaks the rules. But those were rules of a different time.

"Loki," Iceland nods. "Loki couldn't stand Baldr. But everyone else—and *everything* else—in the world loved Baldr, so much that upon his mother Frigg's request, everything in the world promised not to harm him."

"Then how's he going to die?" asks Slovakia. "Loki's not the sort to strangle."

"He could use a knife," counters Luxembourg.

"The knife promised not to hurt him."

"You don't know that."

"He said *everything*—"

"Everything *except*," Iceland says, "mistletoe."

"The Christmas decoration?"

Iceland turns to Hong Kong. Hong Kong has plenty of questions among the two of them, but in this cellar he's let Iceland speak with almost no comment. Hong Kong's eyes are still closed, but his hands are relaxed against his thighs. He's listening.

"Mistletoe has power to the gods," Iceland explains. "But Frigg never got a promise from mistletoe because she thought it was too young."

"Too *young*?" Slovakia asks.

Iceland shrugs. "It's how the story goes."

He goes on to describe the plot: the gods making a game of throwing things at the invincible Baldr. Loki singling out Hod, Baldr's blind half-brother, and arming him with a mistletoe-laden spear. Loki helping Hod take aim, but letting the spear fly from Hod's hand. When he describes how Baldr drops dead like a puppet cut from its strings, Belgium gasps.

Distantly, a bomb explodes.

“One of the gods rushed to the land of the dead,” Iceland hurries on, “to ask the death goddess Hel to let him go. She said that if everyone in the world cried tears for Baldr’s death, Hel would let him come back.”

“Hel? Loki’s daughter, Hel?” says Slovakia. “I smell a plot.”

“Do you talk this much to the radio too?” Luxembourg snaps.

“Everyone and everything in the world *did* cry for Baldr,” says Iceland, “except an old woman. She refused, saying”—he struggles to translate the idea to English—“‘what has Baldr ever done for me?’ So Baldr stayed dead.”

“That can’t be right.” Belgium frowns, as if she can convince the woman that Baldr is worth her tears.

“When the gods left the old woman, she turned back into Loki,” says Iceland, ignoring the triumphant snorts of Slovakia and Luxembourg. “And when Loki returned to the gods, he pretended to mourn Baldr’s death like the others. But everyone put together how Loki had caused his death. Loki tried to flee, but they caught him. They took him underground and chained him to a rock. Above the rock, the goddess Skadi pinned a snake with venom dripping from its fangs. The venom dropped on Loki, causing him to scream and move against his chains—”

“And then he escaped.” Slovakia sounds smug. “He always does.”

“No, he hasn’t,” says Iceland. “But he will.”

“Chained down in a cave? How?” says Belgium.

“The stories aren’t clear. But we know that when he does, he’ll join with the giants to fight the gods. That will be Ragnarök, the great war. In our language, it means ‘twilight of the gods’.”

“Twilight?” Hong Kong frowns. “But they’ll win.”

“They won’t. The gods will die. Thor will die fighting the world serpent, even though he’ll kill it too. Frey will die fighting the fire giant Surtr. And Odin...” Iceland trails off. This was a bad idea, talking about the end of the world in the center of a burning city. The faces around him are lost, still processing the fact that gods can have a foretold end.

“It’s not all bad, though,” says Iceland. “It’s not the Apocalypse of the Bible. Baldr will come back, and a few other gods too. It will be their turn to rule the new world.”

“What about the humans?” Hong Kong’s voice is small. When Iceland looks, his eyes are finally open. He lifts his head up to look at Iceland. “When the gods die, what happens to the humans?”

“There will be two that survive, a woman and a man. Líf and Lífþrasir are their names. They’ll be safe in the trunk of the world tree, and they’ll continue the human line.”

Iceland sits looking at his hands. Two people to recreate an entire race—and which race will that be? The five in this cellar each represent millions of people. Hundreds of thousands, in Iceland’s case. There’s no case to be made for Iceland’s people to survive the end of the world while all the rest perish. And yet five nations, not the mightiest ones by far, sit thinking that surely their people will be the ones to live. By their very existence, they have no choice but to believe it.

“Well,” says Slovakia. For the first time that Iceland has seen, he sits up and stretches. “I for one have had enough of prophecies. Any of you know any fairy tales?”

“I suspect many of ours are the same,” Belgium points out, “coming from the same continent and all.”

“Perhaps you and your brothers have similar stories,” says Slovakia, “but there’s only one way to find out what they have in common with mine.”

And just like that, Iceland’s burden of storytelling is lifted for the night. The other three nations in the room take turns speaking, interrupting, and ultimately arguing whose culture owns the girl who slept in ashes until she married a prince from a ball.

Iceland takes a new role: he takes Hong Kong’s hand. From Hong Kong’s grip, he’s needed that comfort since the first night they sat there.

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One week of bombing becomes two. Two becomes three, and before they realize, they’ve endured a month of daily attacks. Most of the raids occur in the daytime, but somehow the exhaustion of sitting and waiting—always waiting—fails to make it into their sleep.

September blurs and bleeds into October. The five of them sit in the cellar every day, their routines disrupted. Belgium begins bringing down mending; Slovakia returns to his naps. Luxembourg uses the deck of cards to play solitaire.

Of them all, Hong Kong seems the worst off. It worries Iceland that his calm, even suave demeanor disappears with the close of the cellar door. Every time the light on the ceiling moves or the ground above them rumbles, Hong Kong’s eyes seal shut and his breathing picks up.

Iceland finds himself extending his left hand to Hong Kong without even noticing. It happens not when the door closes, but the minute he sees Hong Kong swallow. Unlike in the garden, his palms are sweaty while Iceland’s are cool. Iceland says nothing of it.

He tells stories from the Edda. While the others interacted more before, now they treat it as a sort of radio program: they tense and relax in the right places, and occasionally Belgium or Luxembourg will look up with a smile, but they have no need to participate.

Hong Kong, on the other hand, picks up his questions when the planes are far enough away to ignore. In a way, it’s as if Hong Kong and Iceland have resumed their time in the attic. Sometimes they get so absorbed in their tangents that Iceland startles to hear Slovakia snort from his cot.

What most distinguishes October from September is that the Germans move their attacks to the nighttime. This somehow makes the Blitz even worse.

“I *just* fell asleep,” gripes Slovakia when Iceland and Hong Kong reach the cellar. He’s brought his pillow with him.

Belgium bites her lip and looks at the drop cloths on the bench Iceland and Hong Kong usually take. “Is it worth trying to sleep here?” she asks. Iceland hasn’t seen her in her nightgown before; it looks too soft and pink for the jaundice light of the cellar’s single bulb.

“I’m certainly going to try,” says Luxembourg. In a sudden movement, he dashes to the cot that Slovakia has claimed for every raid so far.

“Hey!” Slovakia stumbles after him and tries to push him away with his pillow. “You want me on the floor with your sister and the lovebirds? Give it up!”

“Lovebirds?” Iceland echoes, but no one answers him. Slovakia successfully defends his cot while Belgium lays out the drop cloths on the floor.

Iceland turns to Hong Kong and is struck. They’d both woken so blearily when the air raid siren sounded in the middle of the night, but while a trip down the stairs woke Iceland well enough, it hasn’t stirred Hong Kong at all. His hair, normally swept over his forehead gracefully, is standing on end. He squints, watching Belgium set up the makeshift blankets, and the dim yellow light makes him look soft and unfocused. He yawns and rubs one eye with the back of his hand.

Something in Iceland’s stomach turns upside-down.

Belgium stands up and brushes her hands of dust. “It’ll do,” she proclaims. From right to left, she designates spots: “Lucien, me, Emil, Leon.”

“Stefan.” Slovakia raises his hand from the cot. His other is under his pillow—he’s already drifting off.

Luxembourg glares at him and slips himself between the drop cloths on the floor, almost underneath the bench he and his sister share. Belgium settles in beside him. Hong Kong and Iceland stand above them.

“You can take the end,” Hong Kong says quietly.

“It’s fine.” Iceland won’t look at him. He’s still trying to figure out what on earth his stomach did the last time he looked. He settles between the drop cloths—itchy, musty, even the one Belgium had folded into a makeshift pillow—and faces the back of Belgium’s head.

He can feel Hong Kong settle down beside him, leaving an inch or two of space between them. Any more and he’d be under the bench like Luxembourg, Iceland knows. But he still feels his presence more vividly than he’d ever felt it in their room.

A moment or two passes. Then, Luxembourg’s voice: “Can we turn off the light?”

“I don’t think it’s safe,” murmurs Belgium.

“I don’t think I can sleep with it on.”

“Slovakia has.”

“That was a nap,” Slovakia grumbles. “This is night. Light off.”

“Light off,” says Luxembourg.

“On.” Hong Kong’s tone is surprisingly firm for someone rubbing his eyes not five minutes ago.

“Iceland?” asks Belgium.

Iceland pauses. He’s been sleeping with the light on since he’s arrived here, less because he and Hong Kong discussed it and more because he can sleep through anything but (evidently) a siren. Having the light on now, though, only reinforces the strangeness of this situation. He can stay asleep easily, but falling asleep outside his bed is a different challenge.

“Off,” he says quietly.

Luxembourg stumbles out of his sheets and pulls the string on the bulb above them. The room falls into darkness so thick he trips over his sister while resettling.

Iceland is no stranger to the dark. For a few days in winter, he experiences nothing but. Still, despite his hope, sleep eludes him, and he listens to the sounds of his companions nodding off. Slovakia breathes evenly as always; Luxembourg snores, and Belgium might as well be dead except for how decisively she turns over.

Behind him, he hears Hong Kong's breathing taper off slower than the others. Finally, just as Iceland is falling asleep himself, a plane engine roars overhead, and he and Hong Kong wake at the same time.

Hong Kong is panting. Iceland calms when he realizes where he is, but Hong Kong's breathing picks up until Iceland can almost feel his chest heaving from here.

"Hey," Iceland whispers. Belatedly he hears his own voice as Norway's, soft and gentle in the night.

"Iceland."

"Are you alright?"

A pause. "I want the light on."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay."

Iceland props himself up on an elbow, and Hong Kong's hand shoots out from under his blanket. In the darkness, he touches Iceland's chest, and Iceland freezes.

"Don't. It's fine."

Another plane whirrs in the distance, and the hand on Iceland's chest tenses.

"It doesn't seem fine," Iceland whispers back.

"It'll be fine for the others."

"I don't care."

Iceland is surprised by his own sincerity.

"Still," says Hong Kong. "I'm outnumbered. I can survive the night."

Slowly, Iceland settles himself back down, this time to face Hong Kong. They spend a few moments listening to one another breathe.

"You sleep with the light on in our room, too," Iceland says.

"Sorry."

"I've slept through it so far. But why?"

"Why do you think?"

“Tell me anyway.” There’s no way Hong Kong—who navigates foreign cultures as if he were born into them, who steps gracefully over rubble on the streets, who hears the latest horrors on the news with little more than a grim nod—is afraid of something as simple as the dark.

“Darkness was...never a good thing,” says Hong Kong. “In a city like mine. Light meant people. Darkness meant something happened to them.”

Iceland pauses. He wants to know more, but this is hardly the time. “Tell me about home,” he says instead. Let him try to employ the same soothing tactics Hong Kong has used on him.

Hong Kong snorts. “Would you believe I haven’t spent much time there in the past fifty years?”

“No.” Iceland can count the times he’s left home last century on one hand.

“China wanted me for visits, of course. But once the Opium Wars ended, England had me and China didn’t. And England had an empire to run. So I left with him.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“It’s nothing I didn’t expect. Taiwan is in the same situation.”

“Taiwan?”

“My sister.”

If Iceland could see, he’d glance to Slovakia, still waiting to be reunited with Czech. Hong Kong has only mentioned his own sister once, and never her name.

“What’s she like?”

“You’ve seen her. The drawing over my bed is of her.”

“Did you draw it?”

“Around 1895. That’s when Japan took her,” he added. “He’d been closing in on her for some time, trying to make her into a ‘model colony.’ I wasn’t sure when I’d see her again.”

Iceland is silent.

“It was so hard for her to sit still,” Hong Kong says with the tiniest of laughs. “And then when I finished it, she wanted to keep it for herself. I promised her I’d give it to her the next time I saw her.”

Iceland frowns. “That hasn’t happened yet, then.”

“It hasn’t.”

Iceland sighs in sympathy. His brothers have been distant since the Viking days, with wars and trade growing in tandem and leaving Iceland behind. Until now, though, he’s never feared he wouldn’t see his family again. The grief is fresh to him, but old news to Hong Kong. By the weight of his silence, though, Hong Kong still grieves in his own quiet way.

“We used to play in the gardens,” Hong Kong whispers so quietly that Iceland strains to hear him. “She always loved the lotus flowers. She’d spend so long searching for two on one stem, and when she’d find it, she’d give it to me. It means something like...” For the first time, Hong Kong seems to struggle with an English word. “A shared heart.”

“She must have liked you a lot.”

“We were the closest in age. And climate. And China kept us closest to him, when he could.”

“What kind of brother was China?”

“Busy. England would say ‘harried’. He always had something to be doing.” Hong Kong pauses. “Sometimes I felt like more of his responsibility than his family.”

“Family *is* responsibility.” Iceland thinks bitterly of Sweden, refusing Norway refuge in their shared mountains.

“Of course. In our thinking, a younger brother should always be loyal to his older brother, and in return the older brother is responsible. China never had the sort of affection Taiwan had, though. He wasn’t the type. We mostly knew he cared by the way he worried.”

“I know that feeling.”

“Norway?”

“Norway. He tried so hard to be casual as I got older, but he always wanted to know how Denmark was treating me.”

Hong Kong hums.

“Doesn’t China ask that too?” says Iceland. “About England?”

“China thinks a little longer-term than most Westerners. To be honest, most of his letters talk about plans for when I return to him.”

Iceland frowns. “I didn’t know you were going back.”

“That was the deal: England can keep me for ninety-nine years.”

“When do you return, then?”

“1997.”

“1997?”

“Shh!”

Iceland jolts. Slovakia has apparently woken up at Iceland’s exclamation, and after his shushing, he rolls over. Iceland and Hong Kong hold their breath, but not five seconds later they exhale in a fit of giggles.

“He’s thinking fifty years into the future?” Iceland whispers. “How can he even imagine it?”

“He’s lived a long life,” Hong Kong murmurs back.

“A life that’s currently—” Iceland cuts himself off.

Hong Kong’s pillow rustles in what might be a nod. “Under Japan, yes.”

“So he and Taiwan...?”

“Might be together again. That’s the funny thing about this war. It’s divided the world, but it’s

brought so many of us together.”

Iceland has no response. He’s in a house full of well-meaning strangers, and Hong Kong. Hong Kong is always the exception.

Between their conversation and Slovakia’s sleepy interruption, neither of them has noticed the rumbling drawing closer. They’re caught off guard by a not-so-distant explosion, and any relaxed atmosphere evaporates. Hong Kong’s breathing begins to pick up again.

“It’s just a plane,” Iceland murmurs. He reaches out and finds Hong Kong’s hand between them. When it left his chest, it never went back to Hong Kong’s side of the sheet. It laid there waiting. “You said it yourself at breakfast—they’re just trying to scare us.”

“It’s working.”

The admission makes Iceland’s hair stand on end. Hong Kong isn’t supposed to be like this. He’s the brave one, the experienced one, the one who takes everything impassively and maybe with a quip. And so what if he sleeps with a light? If that’s what he needs—

“The lantern,” Iceland breathes.

Hong Kong makes a questioning noise.

“There’s a lantern on the shelf with the cards. I can’t believe we didn’t think of it.”

“Check for matches.” The fabric rustles—Hong Kong is withdrawing more into his blanket.

Iceland lifts himself from the floor, careful not to nudge Belgium, and takes three steps until his fingers touch the shelf. He reaches up, staring straight ahead for lack of anything to see, and feels around in butterfly touches until he finds the cool glass of the lantern. After another minute he finds matches on top of the crate beside it.

“Where are you?” he asks the darkness.

“Here.”

He tiptoes back but doesn’t settle into his sleeping area yet. He sits cross-legged above where he thinks Hong Kong’s head is and strikes a match against the back of its book.

It’s a tiny light, but it’s the only one in the cellar, and for a moment Iceland can see nothing but the flame. When he looks beyond it, he finds Hong Kong lying on his side, his hand lying on the cloth where Iceland used to be, staring up at him.

They examine each other until the match burns itself out. Iceland hisses—the match burned down to his fingertips—and strikes another. This time he uses it to find the opening of the lantern and light the inside. With the oil lit, the room fills with a glow half as bright as the electric light would have been.

At the end of the sleeping row, Luxembourg stirs and squints up at them. “I thought we said no light,” he says groggily.

“You can handle it,” Iceland says as quietly and firmly as he can manage. He places the lantern a foot away from Hong Kong’s head and crawls back between the drop cloths. This time he lies on his side facing Hong Kong and finds himself mirroring his curled-up position. They make two ends of a pair of parentheses. The lines of tension around Hong Kong’s eyes that the electric light



usually highlights are gone. He looks sleepy, just like when they first stepped into the cellar for the night.

They sigh at the same time. They seem to have used up their conversation for the night, but it feels like no big loss.

Iceland watches Hong Kong until he's sure he's fallen asleep.

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The Blitz continues for fifty-six days straight. After the first night sleeping under the drop cloths, they start keeping spare linens in the cellar and fall into as comfortable a routine as they can manage. Hong Kong shuts the door, Slovakia tucks himself on the cot, Belgium and Luxembourg lay out linens, and Iceland lights the lantern before turning off the electric light.

Some nights they fall asleep instantly. Other nights, their capacity for sleep is ruined by the muffled sounds of sirens and aircraft and bombs. Belgium and Luxembourg sometimes speak to each other in their guttural language, but no one whispers as much or as late as Iceland and Hong Kong.

One night in November, Iceland wakes up in his bed and realizes the siren never sounded that night. Sunlight trickles onto the floor beneath the blackout curtains. Slowly, he rolls over to face the bed opposite him.

Hong Kong's face glows in the overhead light. His chest rises and falls slowly and evenly. His mouth opens slightly, and his eyes are serenely closed instead of squeezed shut.

Iceland examines him a moment longer before rising to turn off the light, open the curtains, and let dawn flood the room.

The sound of his creaking bed wakes Hong Kong. "No Blitz?" he whispers. His voice is thick with sleep.

"Not today," Iceland answers. It feels like a promise, and—through no ability of his—one that comes true.

Iceland decides to make porridge to give Belgium a break, and he, Hong Kong, Belgium, and Luxembourg have a late breakfast. When they hear footsteps on the stairs and turn to see Slovakia, Iceland nearly chokes on his watered-down coffee.

Slovakia serves himself a bowl and sits opposite the head of the table, as if he's done this every day. Iceland catches his eye, but immediately looks away. The others at the table are concentrating on their porridge as if speaking Slovakia's presence aloud might scare him off.

"It's November," Slovakia announces. "What do the English do for Christmas?"

Hong Kong takes a sip of coffee. "Not much, in light of rations. But we could arrange something."

They make an agreement: gifts worth no more than half a pound (and free if they can manage it) plus a Christmas dinner. No carols, but they can enjoy anything on the radio. Belgium takes inventory of traditional Christmas foods in their homelands and takes great care to ask Hong Kong about any Chinese recipes. Hong Kong waves her off, stating "good Chinese food isn't worth the effort it would take." He also promises to find England's Christmas decorations, which he imagines to be hidden in the cellar that's sheltered them for the last two months.

“Where *is* England, anyway?” asks Luxembourg. “You’d think he would return to his own house to see if it were safe.”

“I imagine he’s been waylaid in meetings with the other allies,” says Hong Kong. “He did warn me he’d be able to come less frequently. That’s why I’m hosting you on his behalf.”

Hong Kong is proven right when the house receives a telegram later that afternoon. It turns out that just before the Blitz, England had left for North America to lobby the Americans for their support. America has been neutral so far, and if this war is anything like the Great War, he’ll be arriving late to the party while pretending he’s been hosting it all the while.

“Poor England,” says Hong Kong when he finishes reading.

“‘Poor England?’” Luxembourg asks. “He never saw his own country being attacked night after night.”

“He probably felt it,” Belgium murmurs. “Just after he left. You can’t say you haven’t been feeling it either.”

Belgium, Luxembourg, and Slovakia all look between one another. Iceland frowns. He’s been occupied, it’s true, but by friendly forces—although he hesitates to think of England as friendly. The three before him, however, are governments in exile. Their people are subject to the Germans, and to whatever wrath or battles the Germans see fit to wreak. Of course they would feel them, the same as they would an upset stomach or a bruise. At any time, they could suffer their own Blitz pains without even knowing yet that their people were attacked.

Judging from Hong Kong’s expression, he’s forgotten this too.

Talk of Christmas fades for the day, and the nations separate to their corners of the house. Hong Kong informs Iceland that he’s going to check on the colonies’ apartments closer to Parliament. “They’re probably overrun with MI6,” he says, “but if the air raids really are finished, there’s a chance the others could be coming back.”

*To fight* lingers unspoken between them.

Iceland nods slowly and stays in the foyer until Hong Kong closes the door. He puts on his apron, gloves, and hat, and gardens alone for the day. When he looks up, he finds only calm gray sky.

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Another air raid attack comes two nights later. The others sigh and return to the cellar, but after two days of reprieve, their spirits have lifted enough to take the bombs in stride again.

Iceland spends most of November and half of December gathering Christmas presents for the other members of the house. Two are easy. Per Belgium’s suggestion, they each sacrifice a food they would normally buy at the market to save money for England and Slovakia. England will receive the best cognac they can afford for his study. As for Slovakia, he can choose whether to keep the house’s new second radio in the cellar or in his room.

Hong Kong persuades Iceland to set aside a spot in the garden to grow some flowers for Belgium. Iceland is tasked with figuring out which kind she likes that they can afford; rather than attempting some subtle conversation, he enters the third-floor bathroom while Belgium is out shopping and finds that she uses a freesia and lily perfume. At their next shopping trip Hong Kong finds the seeds, which will themselves be the present. They’ll have to wait until spring to plant, but

Belgium's gift is secured.

Luxembourg is harder. Iceland wants to continue the toiletries route and find him some hair gel, but Hong Kong teases that he can do better than that. So instead Iceland goes down the path of "things we can use in the cellar" and locates some animal bone dice at the market. Surely Luxembourg knows some dice games, and if not, Iceland can teach him.

The biggest challenge is Hong Kong's gift, but not because Iceland has no ideas. Rather, it's because he and Hong Kong are inseparable. They share a room, a garden, and every meal, and every third day they go to the market together. Hong Kong also runs errands with Slovakia, but since only two people can leave the house at a time and Iceland doesn't want a second partner, that means Iceland can't go out to buy a gift without Hong Kong seeing it.

He tries to write an epic poem, but his brain seems to work only in Icelandic. Besides, he spends more time describing Hong Kong's steadfast gaze than the dragon he's supposed to be fighting, and he burns the evidence in the fireplace when he rereads it. It's a waste of paper rations, but he can't let that be seen by anyone ever again.

The solution presents itself when the two of them are at market in early December. Iceland has just procured vegetables for dinner when he sees Hong Kong a few stalls away at an artist's table. The artist has apparently traveled far, based on his sketches of the Eiffel Tower (which Iceland has seen once), the Colosseum (which Iceland has only heard of), and several monuments Iceland has never known.

The picture Hong Kong is fixating on is a dreamier image: a waterfront with several stone houses and some arched bridges, dotted not by streetlamps but by a string of lights shaped like spheres.

"Where was this drawn?" asks Hong Kong to the vendor.

"A small town outside Shanghai."

"Isn't that Venice?" Iceland asks. Hong Kong glances at him.

"It's just as old as Venice," he says. Turning back to the vendor, he asks, "Have you had any chance to visit Hong Kong?"

The vendor rubs the back of his neck. "Ah, I only stayed there a brief time. It was my port of entry, but my real destination was Shanghai. That was back before it was called the Pearl of the Orient."

"That's the nickname for Hong Kong," says Hong Kong mildly, but Iceland can pick up the pride and irritation in his voice. "Not to mention we have the Pearl River."

"You'd know better than I, I suppose," says the vendor. "I'll tell you what: a ten-percent discount, for a young man so far from home."

"Not if that's not a picture of home," Hong Kong quips. With a polite but frigid nod, he leaves for the jam table.

Iceland lingers a moment longer. He's seen very little of Asia, even in pictures as small as this postcard. The graceful arch of the bridges and the reflection of the lights in the water strike him as beautiful.

"What are these?" he asks, pointing to the lights. "Not streetlamps?"

"Paper lanterns," says the vendor, more gruffly now that he's lost a sale. "You form some wire or

bamboo like a globe, and you cover it in paper and set a candle at the bottom. The Chinese write good wishes on the sides for luck.”

Iceland nods and thanks the vendor and catches up with Hong Kong. He turns the image over in his mind, and the minute Hong Kong leaves with Slovakia the next day, he returns to the cellar to find wire.

He plans to keep the tools and (eventually, if he’s successful) the lantern in the wardrobe at the foot of his bed. Problematically, he’s still been living out of his suitcase, which is set right in front of it like a protest from his former self. Hong Kong comes home to find him hanging his clothes in the wardrobe.

“Hey.”

“Hey. How was the market?”

Hong Kong doesn’t answer immediately. Iceland turns to see him sitting on his bed, watching him. “You’re unpacking,” he says.

Iceland nods.

Hong Kong nods too. Iceland resumes putting his clothes away, slower this time. He sets the suitcase itself at the bottom of the wardrobe with a decisive *thump* and shuts the doors.

“If you’re going to unpack,” Hong Kong says, “would you mind if I brought some things from my room? The one near Parliament.”

Iceland blinks. “Of course,” he says. He wonders what brought this on.

Hong Kong leaves alone the next day, in the first snow of the season. Iceland remains in the cellar, trying to shape wire, and hides it when he hears Hong Kong’s returning footsteps. He climbs up the stairs to their room to see Hong Kong pinning several new adornments to the wall: an embroidered charm hanging from a braided red thread, drawings of landscapes, a scroll of a long serpent. On his bedside table is a small vase with several sticks coming out of it.

“I won’t burn the incense.” Hong Kong nods to the sticks Iceland is examining. “It’s just that the smell reminds me of home.”

Iceland sits on his bed and watches him work. “What’s the serpent?” he asks.

“Dragon.” Hong Kong turns to him with a small grin. “They’re a little different from what you’re used to.”

“Less fat, certainly.”

“Less evil, too.”

“How so?”

“Asian dragons aren’t supposed to be fought and killed. They can help or hurt, just like any other animal.”

“A little like Loki.”

“Exactly.” Hong Kong sits on the bed. “I get the sense your people saw Loki as evil too.”

“Well, he acted *argr*.”

“Ar-grr?”

“Er...not how a man should act. It was a big insult at the time.”

“What did he do that was unmanly?”

Iceland files the new word into his memory. “Well, he gave birth to an eight-legged horse.”

“Of course. Any true man bears a normal four-legged horse.”

“It was more the act of giving birth—” Iceland stops when he sees Hong Kong’s grin grow larger. “You think you’re so funny.”

“I try.” Hong Kong’s smile diminishes as he looks down at his hands. “What else is unmanly?”

“He shapeshifts. A true man doesn’t hide himself.”

“But he uses it to help the gods.”

“But he...I suppose he enjoys it too much. When Thor had to pretend to be Freya, it was clear he was still Thor. He didn’t have the appetite of a lady, or the voice or the face of one. But when Loki transformed into a woman to be his handmaiden, he *became* a woman. Even the poem starts referring to him as ‘she.’”

“Alright, so being a woman is not being a man. I suppose I understand.”

Hong Kong doesn’t look up. Iceland cocks his head. “What’s wrong?”

He lifts his head abruptly. “Nothing.”

Iceland retraces the conversation. “It’s not...being *argr* today isn’t such a bad thing. The word mostly means ‘angry’ now.”

“Good. I think.”

“...Do you think Loki is good?”

Hong Kong looks out the window. “I think Loki acts on what he feels. And whether that’s good or not, I think few of us live that honestly.”

Iceland follows his stare to the falling snow. They share a few moments of silence, but for the first time in a while, Iceland can’t guess what’s going through Hong Kong’s mind.

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Christmas Day starts slowly. Iceland wakes to the smell of bacon wafting from three stories below.

He wakes to find Hong Kong looking at him, and they grin at one another. Downstairs, they find Luxembourg frying bacon under Belgium’s supervision. Slovakia has already served himself.

“Happy Christmas!” Belgium says cheerfully and gestures to her brother. “This is our gift to the three of you.”

“You shouldn’t have,” says Hong Kong, even as he grabs a plate from the cabinet. As disburser of

the household's shopping funds, he knows most how expensive meat is.

"It's a holiday," counters Luxembourg. "Even for you, in some capacity."

Iceland raises an eyebrow at Luxembourg. Beyond Belgium's questions about Chinese food, no one has mentioned that Hong Kong may not celebrate Christmas.

Hong Kong only rolls his eyes. "Just make it crispy, or I may see fit to cook enough New Years' dishes for just myself."

The five of them finish breakfast and exchange gifts at the table. Apart from the bacon, Iceland receives a small book of fairy tales from Slovakia—"to give you some variety"—and a drawing from Hong Kong. The rest of the table passes it around before Iceland can get a good look at it: an image of a brawny man, arms crossed and holding a hammer, listening to a slender man as he speaks and gesticulates.

"I wanted to draw Thor smiling," Hong Kong clarifies, "but even Thor gets suspicious of Loki from time to time."

Iceland's cheeks ache. He realizes only when he looks up at Hong Kong that he's beaming. The expression on Thor's bearded face is so ridiculously stern, and yet somehow in character. It almost mirrors Slovakia's whenever he figures out what Loki is about to do, although Iceland certainly won't announce it to the table. As for Loki, he's made of sharp lines and thin curves, and both his and Thor's eyes hold traces of amusement. Despite everything, they're friends.

"I love it," says Iceland. Even Slovakia smiles in response.

Iceland has to go upstairs to fetch the paper lantern—admittedly lumpier than he would have liked—from his wardrobe, and when he tells Hong Kong where he grabbed it from, Hong Kong laughs.

"Is *that* why you unpacked? I thought you were tired of crouching in front of your suitcase every morning!"

"You only unpacked last month?" Luxembourg interrupts. The other two are looking at Iceland with degrees of confusion.

Iceland shrugs. This place will never be home, but the bed upstairs is his, and that's the best compromise he'll make.

Hong Kong and Iceland volunteer to wash the dishes while the others take a nap, but before any of them can separate, the door unlocks.

"Hullo?" calls a voice.

"England?" Hong Kong calls back. The man himself steps in from the foyer and looks around the table. The circles under his eyes are dark, but his shoulders are straight. Iceland recalls the phrase "stiff upper lip" from the radio and suddenly understands it. England has suffered the Blitz abroad and come home by Christmas.

"England," says Belgium. "I hope you've been well."

"Under the circumstances." England makes no move to take his seat at the head of the table. They've left it open for him at least since Iceland has been here. "Happy Christmas, all." They repeat it, and then England turns to Iceland. "I have a surprise for you, if you're ready."

Iceland trades glances with Hong Kong, and then stands.

England leads him to the foyer, where a tall, blond figure is standing awkwardly near the door.

*“God jul, lillebror,”* he says in a quiet voice that still rumbles like the distant bombs of the Blitz. *Merry Christmas, little brother.*

*“Svíþjóð,”* says Iceland. *Sweden.*

The two stare at each other while England glances between them. When they don't show any sign of beginning a joyous reunion, England runs a hand through his hair. “Oh dear,” he says. “We'd better take this to the parlor.”

He gestures them to the opposite side of the foyer to the parlor, mumbling something about how he'll be in his study upstairs. Iceland thinks he hears something about tea, but it's no louder than the rush of blood in his ears. On the one hand, family. On the other, betrayal. He's known Sweden almost as long as he's known Denmark and Norway—although never been as close to him—and if current events weren't as they were, he'd be beside himself with relief. As it is, though, Sweden has reportedly made no effort to save those he once called his brothers.

And now he sits across from Iceland in an overly plush chair, looking uncomfortably large and mismatched. He wears a trench coat he hasn't bothered to take off, and his glasses are cracked in one lens.

“You look well,” Sweden begins in Swedish.

“No better thanks to you,” Iceland counters in Norwegian. Sweden never did learn fluent Icelandic. “Neutrality, Sweden? Neutrality when Norway and Denmark have been captured?” A weight settles on his chest. “*Are they captured?*”

“Denmark is.” Norwegian seems to be the language they'll do this in. “As for Norway, I don't know. I met his royal family yesterday. They say they didn't know you were here.”

“I haven't visited.”

“Why not?”

“I don't need company.”

Sweden nods. Iceland nods back. It's nothing like with Hong Kong, or even with the Sweden of another era, where their silence is companionable. All of Iceland's fears and uncertainties break through the dam he's built around the time of the Blitz. He remains silent only because he doesn't know which question to ask first.

“You have to understand,” says Sweden.

“Do I?”

Sweden sighs. “You were easier to talk to as a child. Less temper.”

“Temper? I think I earned my temper the moment you closed your border with Norway. You have the nerve to visit his royal family without news of him? And then come to me with the same?” Iceland folds his arms across his chest. “What do you want?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hong Kong poised at the door with a tea tray. He shakes his

head at him, but Hong Kong enters anyway.

“England’s insistence,” Hong Kong says to them both.

“Thank ya,” says Sweden. For a moment, Iceland is proud that his English is better than that of a member of his family. Then he remembers why “family” is evidently the wrong word for Sweden. He nods at Hong Kong, ignoring his look of concern, and watches him leave.

Neither of them picks up the tea. It’s going to steep for too long, so Iceland leans forward and extracts the leaf basket from the pot.

“You’ve learned,” says Sweden. Back to Norwegian again.

“To be English? Not at all.”

Sweden leans forward. “I brought a message from Denmark.”

Iceland’s hand trembles, and he has to set down the teapot even though he just picked it up. “What is it?”

“Read it yourself.” Sweden digs into the pocket of his trench coat and emerges with a thin envelope that has seen better days. It’s yellowed and the ink on the outside has run with the rain. But Iceland recognizes Denmark’s scrawl even from the distance of Sweden’s hand.

Iceland accepts the letter and gingerly cracks the seal fit with the Danish crown. The letter is written in Danish and dated April of this year.

*Iceland,*

*I hate to say that we probably won’t be able to talk for a while.*

*German forces are coming closer, and I’m going to surrender. They have their eye on Norway, and next on you, and you know they’ll march through me to reach you. If I give in, I can save more of our people’s lives than I could by fighting.*

*I do this knowing you and Norway will be fine. He has his mountains and you have your seas—all I have is flat land directly connected to Germany. You’ll stand a chance. As for me, I’ve made peace with my decision.*

*You’ve probably noticed by now that my ships haven’t been able to reach you. So, I’ve given this letter to Sweden. He’s neutral like me, but he has a better chance of enforcing it. I can only hope he’ll take care of you and Norway like I couldn’t.*

*I don’t expect you to understand all this right away. We’ve tried to protect you for so long, and in the end, maybe that was a mistake. I can’t keep you anymore, Iceland. That’s why Norway and I have asked England to watch over you and, as soon as possible, to help make you a fully independent nation. My king will no longer be your king; if you want, Icelandic can be your only language.*

*You’ll be independent, but you’ll always be our little brother. May Odin grant you his wisdom, and Thor his strength. I love you, and I’ll see you at the end of this.*



*Your brother,  
Denmark*

“What does it say?” Sweden asks softly.

Iceland looks up with a lump in his throat. Even if he could speak around it, he doesn't know how to summarize what he's just read. He sets his jaw and holds out the letter, but the minute it leaves his fingers, they close into a fist.

Independent. He's going to be an independent nation. Hasn't he felt independent for so long already? So distant from everyone else, so infrequently visited or bothered. He has his fishing and his poetry and his government meetings—he's been independent in all but name since the Great War ended—but this is different. The world has become so grave, his family so fragmented, that not even Denmark can keep him safe now. Denmark, who's been so strong and omnipresent in Iceland's life as to be like a god.

And *Norway*. When did Denmark have a chance to speak to Norway? Why didn't they think to tell him about this in person? And if Denmark was captured so soon after this letter, what does that mean for Norway? Is he in occupied territory? Has he somehow crossed to Sweden without anyone knowing? Could he get away in time?

Sweden reads the letter. His hand trembles once, halfway through, and then falls still.

“He said you were going to protect us,” Iceland whispers when Sweden looks up.

“He said he hoped I could.”

Iceland's voice raises. “Then why is Norway's king here and not with you?”

Sweden rubs the place between his eyes, above his glasses. The letter is still in his lap.

“What have you heard of Finland?” he asks.

Iceland frowns. Thanks to the Blitz, he's paid less attention to events abroad. “I haven't spoken to him,” he says.

“Me neither. But I know he's in trouble.”

“Russia.”

“Russia. Their most recent war ended in March.”

“Just when I'd stopped receiving ships from Denmark.”

“You didn't see the newspapers.” Sweden nods. “Russia and his Soviets still want his land. Normally I'd defend him myself, but—”

“But Germany would notice.”

“Finn's looking east every day. I can keep his west safe.”

“What about Norway? He was looking east to you, for help.”

“We haven't spoken since January.”

“What did you tell his king?”

“The truth. My government is neutral, but my people are with Norway.”

“How.”

“They bring their children across the border, and we hide them. That was the last time I saw Denmark. He brought his Jews.”

Iceland sits back and considers this. “I was angry at you for so long.”

“I tried to reach you. Before the London attacks started.”

“They call it the Blitz here.”

Sweden dips his head once. After a pause, he says, “You’ve been brave.”

Iceland takes a shaky breath. It hasn’t felt like it, but the Blitz took a toll on him even without the pain of bombs or hostile occupation. Months of fear and outrage and uncertainty have built up inside him, and as much as the news informs him, it never calms him. The world is at war, and this is how he debuts as a nation.

“I’ve had help,” he says. Because it’s true.

The two sit back in their chairs. From the kitchen come the low sounds of chatter and the rolling of dice. Slovakia barks a laugh while Luxembourg moans in what sounds like defeat.

“What are your plans?” Iceland asks Sweden. “Will you stay?”

“I’m here in secret. I only have today.”

Despite himself, Iceland sighs. He understands Sweden a lot better in fifteen minutes of conversation than he has in eight months of stewing. The pain of his decision will fade more slowly, but Iceland is ready to admit he missed speaking a language besides English. He missed having a brother.

“King Haakon will give a speech to the people of Norway tonight,” says Sweden.

“He’s in England.”

“The BBC will share it on their world channel.” Sweden pauses, then nods to the radio at the center of the room. “Will you listen to it?”

Iceland looks at the radio and then back at Sweden. “Stay,” he says. “I’ll introduce you to the others.”

He does. Sweden looks almost embarrassingly tall and stern beside the smaller, more cheerful nations sitting at the table. They look at Sweden warily at first, but as he takes off his trench coat and sits at the table beside Iceland, Hong Kong says:

“New rule: if you lose the next round, you have to tell an embarrassing story about one of the other players.”

Iceland widens his eyes at Hong Kong. The people who know the most stories are Belgium about Luxembourg, and Sweden about Iceland.

“That works for me,” says Slovakia. He grabs the dice with a glint in his eye.

They play for the afternoon and into the evening. Belgium has to leave the game around three o'clock to start cooking Christmas dinner, and Sweden becomes stunningly horrible at dice games. When he shares in his thick accent how Iceland once got himself stuck up a tree because he'd never seen one so tall before, the others laugh so hard that England comes down to investigate the fuss.

“That’s hardly worse than this one,” England says after they explain the joke to him. He claps Hong Kong on the shoulder. “Wouldn’t use a toilet for *years*, until I gave him no choice and installed them in every washroom.”

Hong Kong’s face flushes, and Iceland cackles.

They turn on the radio in the parlor during Christmas dinner, but they eat in the dining room. By excellent timing, just as Luxembourg—the slowest eater—has cleared off the last of his plate, the BBC broadcaster announces a special message to the people of Norway from their king. All seven of them leave their plates to sit in the parlor and listen, despite that only two understand Norwegian:

*“When I send you all a greeting today for Christmas, it is with sadness and sorrow in my heart because I and my family cannot celebrate the Christmas season with you in our dear Fatherland. Heavy and threatening clouds hung over our land last Christmas, this year the clouds have been sinking down over the country, so it can be difficult to make use of the good old wish for a ‘merry’ Christmas...”*

As the speech continues, Sweden catches Iceland’s eye. He doesn’t quite smile, but Iceland senses gentleness. Looking around the room, most of the other nations offer a similar expression of support—and this despite that he hasn’t told them about his imminent independence.

He looks back to the radio and listens to the gentle cadence of the king’s voice. Beside him, Hong Kong re-crosses his legs and bumps his knee into Iceland’s. Iceland can tell them tomorrow. He wants to let this day simply be Christmas.

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“Independent, huh?”

Hong Kong blinks at him from his bed. Iceland blurts out the news on December 26<sup>th</sup>, the first moment Hong Kong’s eyes open.

Hong Kong rubs one eye and brings his hand back to smooth his hair. “Congratulations.”

Iceland waits for more, but it doesn’t come. “Thanks,” he says. He rolls onto his back and examines the sloped ceiling. The electric light is still on. On Hong Kong’s bedside table sits the paper lantern Iceland made; it only needs a candle.

“Scared?”

Iceland presses his lips together. “Not yet,” he concedes.

“Did Sweden say why it's happening now?”

“Sweden didn’t tell me. Denmark did, in a letter.” He nods to his wardrobe, where the letter sits in his pocket from yesterday.

“Ah. What did Denmark say?”

“He said he can’t protect me anymore. He said he and Norway talked about it.”

Hong Kong pauses. “It’s not fun, being spoken for.”

He probably means England and China, but those two have a frigid relationship at which Hong Kong is the center. Denmark and Norway, in contrast, have raised him as a pair for most of Iceland’s life. He’s not a responsibility to be abandoned—he’s family. Or so he thought.

Hong Kong sits up on one elbow with a sigh. Iceland looks over and immediately looks away again. The collar of his shirt is skewed to reveal Hong Kong’s collarbone and part of his shoulder. Even in a glimpse, the image imprints itself in Iceland’s mind: smooth skin, clear definition. He might smell like the incense on his table.

Iceland pulls his blanket further up.

“There used to be more children in this neighborhood,” says Hong Kong. If he noticed Iceland’s gaze, he doesn’t comment.

“Oh?”

“Their parents chose to send them to the countryside. England’s intelligence found out about the plans for the Blitz and took precautions.”

“I think Luxembourg mentioned it.”

“Complained about it, more like. But it’s good that the children are safe. Even if they don’t like how it happened.”

“I’m not a child,” Iceland mumbles. “I’m about to become a full nation.”

“Then you’re an older child. So am I, you know. The minute England comes in the door, I’m his younger brother and nothing more. And I can expect that for another fifty years.”

Iceland turns his head to face him. “Even so, you’ve spent so much time away from home.”

“So?”

“So, you know things about the world that I don’t. I’ve only ever seen Europe and North America.”

“If you stay, you’ll get to know the world.” Hong Kong looks towards the blackout curtains. “It’s not hard to, these days.”

Iceland sighs. “I don’t even know what I need to know. Home has always felt so far away from the rest of the world.”

Hong Kong sits up. “Well, I can’t promise you much. But I’ll help with whatever I can.”

Iceland examines Hong Kong. His legs are crossed under his smooth sheets, and he seems to subtly lean towards Iceland’s side of the room.

Iceland offers half a smile. “I think I’ll need it.”

The Blitz picks up again on December 29th. As if to make up for lost time, the sirens blare at six in the evening and the following attack lasts for twelve hours. When they emerge in the morning, they turn on the radio to find that St. Paul's Cathedral has survived, despite heavy fire. The others have to take it from Hong Kong that this is London's own Christmas miracle.

The rest of winter isn't nearly as cold as back home, but Iceland finds comfort in the chill all the same. Hong Kong, in contrast, steals every spare blanket he can find from the cellar and piles them atop his bed. "The attic is the worst possible place in winter," he grumbles one afternoon in mid-February.

"I'm sure Slovakia wouldn't mind a roommate." Iceland flicks through his fairy tale book.

"For one night, I'm sure, before he murders me."

"What for? You don't snore."

"Maybe not, but I've been known to talk in my sleep."

Iceland closes the book. "No."

"Oh, yes. Taiwan used to kick me awake and demand to know what I was saying. She couldn't normally repeat my language well enough, though, so we'd spend half an hour awake mimicking each other's tones until China came to tell us to be quiet."

"Well, I haven't heard you say anything."

"That's because you sleep like a rock."

"What's wrong with being a deep sleeper?"

"Nothing." Hong Kong smirks. "You curl up like a kitten. It's adorable."

Iceland flings the book across the room, where it bounces harmlessly on Hong Kong's fifth layer of blankets. Hong Kong barks a laugh.

Iceland is trying to come up with some retort when they hear a high-pitched scream downstairs.

*Belgium.* They look at each other, all levity gone. Wordlessly they shoot out of their room, Hong Kong before Iceland, and sprint down three flights of stairs.

Belgium is sobbing in the foyer, her arms wrapped around the neck of a man almost as gargantuan as Sweden. The man falls on his knees to the floor, and Belgium kneels with him. Beside the pair stands Luxembourg, staring at the two of them as if unsure whether he's dreaming.

Behind the trio, a second stranger offers a sad smile at Hong Kong and Iceland. Upon second glance, however, he's not a stranger. Iceland has in fact known him since he was a child himself—before he was blond, before he spoke English and French, when he was the newest and most distant brother of the Norse.

"It's been a while," greets Canada. He looks down at the pair on the floor as the man on his knees slowly lifts his arms to wrap around Belgium in return. Iceland recognizes the hair standing on end, from European meetings.

"Canada," says Hong Kong. He stands on the last step, with Iceland one above him. "I see you've found the Netherlands."

Canada rubs the back of his neck. "It's been quite a journey, and Lars is hurt. Can we find him a bed?"

"Our bed," says Belgium. She pulls away from her brother and wipes away her tears. "We can make space for him. Come, Lucien," she says, reaching for her younger brother's arm. Between Canada and Luxembourg, they help the Netherlands rise again. Iceland steps off the stairs and spies a bandage wrapped around Netherlands' forehead and a limp in his step that Canada mostly absorbs.

Hong Kong steps into the kitchen to make tea. Iceland sits at the dining table as Slovakia wanders in. "What's going on?"

"Canada found the Netherlands, I think."

Slovakia nods and takes a seat beside Iceland. They stare at the pattern of the tablecloth and sit listening to the shuffling footsteps two floors above.

Belgium is the first one back downstairs. "I need water and clean cloths," she announces feebly.

"Already taken care of." Hong Kong emerges from the kitchen with a pot of steaming water. Belgium takes it with a perfunctory nod and heads back upstairs.

Canada passes her on the steps and collapses onto a chair across from Iceland and Slovakia. He's grown so much more than Iceland has; his form is thin, but with muscles as ropery as Denmark's. Without the Netherlands, he'd be the tallest person in the house. He folds his hands on the table and looks up only when Hong Kong slides a cup of tea before him and sits down beside him.

"How have things been here?" he asks.

"Not nearly as eventful as whatever you're about to tell us," says Hong Kong. He looks at Canada expectantly.

Canada sighs. "I evacuated his royal family myself. His queen has been here in London since May of last year, but a month later, her daughter the Princess Juliana decided to take her daughters to Ottawa. My capital," he clarifies for Iceland and Slovakia, although Iceland knows at least this. He wonders if Canada recognizes him. "I ran the escort."

"England was stuck in North America during the Blitz," Hong Kong says. "I presume you were too."

"I hosted him when he wasn't lobbying America." Canada examines the three of them. "He's taking the attacks pretty well, all told."

"Tell us how you found him," says Slovakia. He doesn't mean England.

Canada hunches over his tea. Both hands press against the cup for warmth, although Iceland doubts he's cold. "We last saw each other at the royal palace when my team was leading the queen and her family away. He saw them off, but he wouldn't join us on the ship. He said without the queen, there were few who could direct his troops. He hid until he was captured around Christmas."

"But you found him again."

"England's spies found him in detainment near the German border. He was due to be transported to Berlin, so my troops intervened en route."

"If he was captured at Christmas," says Hong Kong, "why did they wait all winter to bring him back to Germany?"

"My guess is logistics." Canada rubs his eyes behind his glasses. "People resist most at the beginning of occupation. Taking away someone as high-profile as the Netherlands would alert the people who know him and make them mobilize the others."

"So?" demands Slovakia. "The rest of us are away from home too. Let our people riot."

"The Germans need the Dutch as calm as possible, or else they'll spend more time stopping riots than they will setting up a military government." Canada takes a drink of his tea. "But this is something you should talk to the Netherlands about, when he feels well enough. I will say, I don't think staying with his people did him any favors."

Iceland frowns. "How so?"

Canada looks at him. "How would you feel to see them suffer just outside your walls?"

Iceland looks back down at the table. It's true that he's concerned for his people as always, but in the deepest part of himself, he knows they're safe. Feeling their suffering would be one thing, but *seeing* it with no escape or way to relieve it—the idea clenches his heart.

"Hey," says Canada gently. "He's here. He's safe now." He turns to Hong Kong. "How were his siblings here, anyway?"

"They were in London asking for help when the attacks began."

Canada nods. "I wonder if any of that had to do with Luxembourg."

Iceland tilts his head.

"He's the youngest," Canada explains. "Belgium and the Netherlands probably meant to protect him, and I know the Netherlands meant to keep Belgium safe too."

Iceland's stomach sinks, and he remembers the letter from Denmark in his wardrobe upstairs.

"But if you can retrieve him," Slovakia says, "then there's nothing stopping us from getting the others."

Canada turns to him. "Who did you have in mind?"

"My sister? Czech?" Slovakia looks at Canada for a moment, and then scoffs in disgust. "You don't know who I am."

"I'm sorry." Canada sounds sincere. "It's been a while since I've traveled east. I haven't had much reason to, and now we have no way to."

"You could stop one nation from reaching Berlin."

"Yes," says Canada. "The nation furthest west, one we can easily send spies and airplanes to. A nation England has a stronger history with."

"As if that's our fault?" Slovakia raises his voice. "Do you know where I was when Germany

invaded *two years ago*? That's right, two full years before any of you western countries. I was in Paris, trying to secure relationships that you blame *us* for not having. You're all neighbors, but who's near us? Poland? Invaded. Austria? Annexed. Hungary? She'd be more likely to join Germany than protect us from him."

"Slovakia—" Hong Kong tries to interject.

Slovakia holds up a single finger to him and stares straight at Canada. "I'm *sorry*," he snarls, "that we didn't make friends with you sooner. But I'm sorrier still that Czech said I should be the one to go. They'll trust a man, she said. She said she'll keep things going at home. And now she's alone in a land that's not ours anymore, and I don't even know if she's still *there*. And you tell us it's our fault for not talking to you sooner?"

Canada opens his mouth, but seems to swallow whatever defense he was about to make. Something in his eyes dims.

"You western nations, you're all the same," spits Slovakia. "You talk about human rights and unity, but the minute the threat turns to you, you turn deaf to us. When France got the news about our invasion, he became so worried about himself that I was shoved out the door. My advisors and I, we took the *Chunnel* to England. Iceland got an airplane escort!"

Iceland sits up straighter and turns more fully to Slovakia. He hadn't realized he was part of the list of grievances.

Slovakia stands from his chair, hisses his final words in his native language, and turns on his heel to climb upstairs.

The remaining three look at each other.

"I could have said that better," Canada concedes. He closes his eyes.

"You did what you could," says Hong Kong. He exchanges a concerned look with Iceland, who returns it uneasily.

After a moment's silence, he excuses himself and follows Slovakia up the stairs. He has no plan, only an urge to make some apology for a situation he didn't even ask for.

When he reaches the third floor, both bedroom doors are closed. Behind one he can hear murmuring in the same guttural language Belgium and Luxembourg use with each other. Occasionally, however, a deeper voice murmurs back. The other room is silent. Iceland taps on the door.

"Go away," says Slovakia's muffled voice. Iceland hesitates. He hated his brothers for doing exactly this, but it's time to see why they do it: he opens the door regardless.

The room contains one bed the size of Iceland's, a wardrobe, a table with the radio he got for Christmas, and a chair. Articles of clothing are strewn across every piece of furniture; Iceland gets the sense that if Slovakia had more than what fit in his suitcase, the room would be even messier. Slovakia lays on the bed, facing the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

Iceland picks up the chair in the corner of the room and brings it within a meter of Slovakia. They sit there for several moments, both looking at the same unfixed point on the wall.

"I don't want your pity," says Slovakia.



"I've said the same before."

By the pause, Slovakia was expecting someone besides Iceland. He turns over.

"If I could have let you have the airplane, I would," says Iceland softly. "It was small, and England took the radio to talk to his generals every moment he could."

"The Chunnel doesn't reach your tiny island anyway," mutters Slovakia. He lets out an unsteady breath.

"I'm sorry about your sister," says Iceland. He's worried he's overstepping, but the more he thinks about it, that's what he's needed to hear for himself. Not England, not Sweden, not even Hong Kong has thought to commiserate with him about his brothers. They've expressed sympathy about his own occupation, but his personal troubles feel so small compared to the shadow cast over his family.

"I can't even send her a letter," says Slovakia. Iceland knows he's alluding to Denmark's letter; when he shared it after Christmas, Slovakia's silence spoke louder than his congratulations. "I don't know how she's eating, or where she's sleeping. The news talks more about America than Czech—America isn't even *in* the war."

Iceland nods. "It isn't fair."

"But they get to be together." Slovakia thrusts a hand at the closed door.

"They're lucky."

"They have good friends. Friends I couldn't find in time."

"You were doing what you could. I never went to Paris."

"You never needed to."

"I didn't know I needed to." Iceland sighs. "I stopped receiving ships from Denmark about a month before England's arrival. Any news came by telegram, and telegrams say so little."

Slovakia blinks. "You didn't know about the war."

"I knew Germany was expanding. Er, invading. But somehow I thought Denmark would be safe, even though he's Germany's neighbor. He's always held his own."

"So has Czech."

Iceland makes a questioning noise.

"She was always the stronger of us two." Slovakia pauses. His next sentence comes quieter.

"Sometimes I wonder if she sent me away like the Netherlands sent his siblings."

"Your name is Czechoslovakia. I would think you're closer than that."

"Then why is she at home and I'm here?"

"I don't know. Bad luck."

"You're awful at comforting people. Don't you have some story about how your gods invented bad luck? Like a bird shat it out."

"That's bad poetry. Very different."

They exchange the slightest of grins. Iceland knows very little about Slovakia, but somewhere in the two months of the Blitz, they've developed a strange bond that Iceland can't quite describe. They're nowhere near siblings, but being stuck together in such dark times has helped them understand each other at an unspoken level.

"I'll leave you alone," Iceland says. "Should I turn on the radio for you?"

"Don't bother. It only plays English news anyway."

Iceland nods and stands to leave, but Slovakia holds up a hand.

"Actually," he says, "play it."

Iceland tunes it to a music station. He shuts the door of the room to the sound of quiet jazz.

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The arrival of the Netherlands spurs a minor crisis in the house: there aren't enough beds.

"We can share," says Belgium at the table that night. The Netherlands is resting upstairs, but she's brought him soup.

"It was cramped enough with just us two," says Luxembourg. "We can't add a third person, especially with his head like it is."

"Don't look at me," says Slovakia. "My bed is fit for one and one only."

"Can we use England's room?" asks Belgium.

Canada and Hong Kong exchange glances. "I wouldn't recommend it," says Hong Kong.

In the middle of this debate, Iceland frowns. It seems every room has one bed, except one.

"Where did my bed come from?" he asks the table.

"Ah. We got that at a flea market," says Hong Kong.

"The movers made such noise bringing it up the stairs," adds Slovakia. "That was how I was told you were coming."

Iceland considers. "Is there room in the budget for another bed?"

Hong Kong looks chagrined. It's not that money has been tight—England's living stipend comes directly from his government—but goods have been hard to come by all the same. Between rations and bombings, the markets have been sparser. They go shopping in pairs not necessarily to get out of the house, but to cover more ground and keep more eyes out for riots or lootings. In such conditions, finding and transporting something as large as a bed would be nearly impossible.

Iceland nods slowly. He looks at Belgium and Luxembourg. "He can have mine."

"What about you?" asks Belgium.

"I've slept in camps more recently than any of you. I can take the floor," says Iceland mildly. He

turns to Hong Kong. "I'll need to take some of your blankets, though."

Hong Kong looks at him with something akin to shock. Iceland raises an eyebrow at him.

"It would solve a big problem," says Canada. "With his head injuries, the Netherlands could really use his own bed. But are you sure you're up for it?"

"If a bed is the most I have to sacrifice," says Iceland, "I'll count myself lucky."

He's left thinking somewhat differently when Canada, Luxembourg, and Slovakia wrestle his mattress and metal frame down the stairs, and Iceland finds himself staring at the space where his bed once was. The others have tossed his sheets and pillow on the floor in its place, and Canada moved the bedside table and his two books to sit beside the wardrobe.

"We can take turns." Iceland turns to find Hong Kong leaning in the doorway.

"Turns on the floor?"

"Right."

"No. I volunteered—I can't bring you into this."

"Please," scoffs Hong Kong. He steps into the room beside Iceland. "You've won the gratitude of all three Benelux nations. I can't let you be the only hero in the household."

"I'd say you're spending too much time with America, but he seems to want to avoid this side of the world."

"Don't be so sure. I have some questions to ask Canada once he finishes downstairs."

"Is he staying here too?"

"He'll stay in the colony rooms that MI6 haven't taken over. He's like England—too many places to be, too many people to talk to. We'll only see him a few days, I bet."

Iceland leans forward as if to sit on his bed, but then yanks himself back. He imagines himself waking up tomorrow, looking up at Hong Kong instead of evenly across from him. Will he even be able to see him?

Hong Kong clears his throat. "There's another solution."

Iceland waits.

"Belgium and Luxembourg have been sharing a bed. It's a little bigger than mine, but. Still."

Iceland blinks at him. "You want to share a bed."

"I want you to not sleep on the floor."

"It's not a problem, really."

"I know. Never mind. It was a stupid idea."

Hong Kong turns away and heads into the hallway, ostensibly to check in on the bed delivery. Iceland stands in the middle of the room. He feels as if he's lost something, and not simply the bed.

He prepares himself for sleep without Hong Kong: puts on his pajamas, brushes his teeth, washes his face. Down the stairs he hears the clack of teacups and the distant discussion of Hong Kong and Canada. Two colonies comparing notes on the empire.

When he reenters their bedroom, he takes one look at the sheets on the floor, folds them neatly, and climbs into the sole remaining bed.

He lies there for what feels like an hour. He's not quite awake, but the electric light is too bright for him to sleep. The light has never been a problem, though, if he's being honest with himself.

When Hong Kong finally comes up the stairs, he pauses at the door. Iceland is pressed as far against the wall as he can manage, burrowing under the layers Hong Kong has collected for himself. He lifts his head from the pillow and looks back.

Wordlessly, Hong Kong rummages through his closet for his pajamas. He changes behind the open wardrobe door, leaves to wash his face, and returns so quickly Iceland can still see water on his chin. Carefully, he lifts the blankets and lays down facing Iceland.

"What changed your mind?" he whispers.

Iceland shrugs. It's just where his feet took him.

They lie closer together than even in the cellar. If he tries, Iceland can count his eyelashes, and when he shuffles, his knee knocks Hong Kong's. Hong Kong is looking back at him, one hand under his head and the other lying on his hip. Too rigidly, as if he's afraid to touch Iceland's hands nestled between their chests.

"You can touch me, you know," breathes Iceland.

Hong Kong exhales, and then the hand on his hip finds its way across Iceland's waist and presses against his back.

Iceland's eyes widen, and Hong Kong jerks his hand back. "Sorry."

Iceland looks at him. He looks...nervous. Iceland takes pity on him. "It's okay. Go ahead."

Slowly, gingerly, Hong Kong returns the hand where it was in a loose embrace. His other hand moves from beneath his head until his knuckles rest against Iceland's.

Hong Kong looks at him intently. He whispers, "You got rid of some of the blankets."

Iceland snorts. "Five layers will smother me."

"I may not need all of them. If you're here."

Iceland adjusts his head under his pillow.

"We'll see."

He closes his eyes first. He's trying to keep cool, like this is a casual decision, but the more he settles into sleep, the more he senses Hong Kong beside him. He doesn't smell like his incense: he smells like wood and fresh soil with a hint of dish soap. He breathes through his nose, emitting little puffs of air that waft toward Iceland. Iceland is overly conscious of the heat of his arm on his waist.

Hong Kong shuffles a little, and the wooden bed creaks. The sound reminds Iceland of a boat.

Sometimes when making camp, his brothers used to leave him in one of the smaller longboats with a tether to shore. When he grew tired of playing, Iceland would lie in the boat and let the waves rock him and the breeze ruffle his hair. Sometimes he would wake to find Denmark carrying him to his tent, where he would fall back asleep in furs to the smell of the campfire.

With this memory and the solidity of Hong Kong's presence, he drifts asleep.

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After that night, sharing a bed becomes simply one more way Iceland and Hong Kong are joined at the hip. It involves compromise: Iceland talks Hong Kong down to a single blanket, and Hong Kong has to coax Iceland from wedging himself between the bed and the wall just to put an inch more space between them. He only has to do so once, though. Iceland finds himself waking up warm and content, usually because he's woken up with Hong Kong curled around him—often with one or more limbs on top of him.

The Germans turn their forces to other cities, so the two have plenty of time to become used to each other's presence without worrying about the others watching. The rare time off from the Blitz seems to do the entire household well: with the chance to sleep through the night, the Netherlands slowly recovers from his head wound, and the others resume their chore schedules without fear of interruption.

Their luck runs out on May 10, just before midnight.

The siren wails, and Iceland's eyes fly open. He feels Hong Kong's heart rate pick up before he sees him truly wake.

"I thought we were finished," he murmurs.

Iceland bites his lip. "Let's bring our pillows."

He trusts the pillows to Hong Kong and helps Luxembourg escort the Netherlands down the stairs. The Netherlands surely can't know what these sirens mean, but he seems to accept them with stoicism.

"Slovakia, he needs the cot," Belgium announces when they've shut the door to the cellar.

"I don't," says the Netherlands. "I'm fine."

"You haven't experienced the Blitz before."

The Netherlands eyes his sister. "I've slept through German planes before." He casts a glance down to the sheets on the floor, and then looks back to her and Luxembourg.

Belgium's face falls. "Of course," she says. Silently, she directs Luxembourg so that the Netherlands can lie down with a sibling on either side of him. The sight of them twangs at Iceland's heart. He hasn't been homesick nearly as often as when he arrived, but it appears he's not immune.

Slovakia brushes past them to his cot, leaving the usual narrow space beside the bench for Iceland and Hong Kong. Iceland grabs the lantern, but the matchbook beside it is empty. Thanks to their sense of safety in the past few weeks, no one has thought to replace it.

"Light," Slovakia calls.

Iceland sets the lantern back on the shelf. "It stays on."

Hong Kong looks up at him. After a moment, he seems to guess the problem and sighs.

Iceland nestles himself between Hong Kong and Luxembourg just in time for the first distant bomb. The first of a chain, it turns out—the time between explosions has been cut in half.

Within the first hour, both of Hong Kong's hands are intertwined with Iceland's. By the second, he's lost count of how many times they've flinched. Iceland begins to think this is the heaviest fire they've ever been under, but he keeps this thought to himself.

One explosion comes too close. The lightbulb above them sputters, and the room falls into darkness.

Hong Kong lets out a single gasp.

Iceland can hear one of them—Belgium, most likely—sitting up to examine the room. There's nothing to see. The darkness is total, and it arrives so suddenly as to make Iceland think of Fenris Wolf swallowing the sun in one bite. Another sign of Ragnarök, the end of the world.

"How are you so calm?" Hong Kong breathes. If he spoke any louder, it would be a whimper.

"I don't know," says Iceland. He hears Belgium resettle and hopes the others have fallen back asleep. "I'm used to the dark."

"Not the dark," says Hong Kong. He takes a few rapid breaths, and then his shoulders heave as he forces himself to calm down. "I understand."

Iceland frowns, despite that it goes unseen. "Understand what?"

"If you disincorporate, you go home." Hong Kong squeezes one of his hands. "So you're not afraid."

A humorless laugh startles out of Iceland. "I'm afraid."

"Not of this."

"I am."

"Not like me."

"You don't have to be," says Iceland gently. "Imagine going home to your people." He wants to continue the thought but finds he can't. He swallows. "That's disincorporation. It's going home."

"It's leaving. That's the difference," says Hong Kong. One of his hands withdraws from Iceland and into his own chest, and the second curls in Iceland's grip. "You want to leave, but I want to stay."

"I..." Iceland takes a shuddering breath. Whatever response he might come up with is swallowed by the rattling sound of gunfire.

Does he want to leave?

He feels Luxembourg's back pressed against his. If he strains, he can hear Belgium's whispered chanting—prayer, he thinks. He imagines dissolving into this darkness and opening his eyes again in a land he recognizes, free to wander anywhere among people who speak his language. England can hardly spare the resources to come back for him; he'd be safe for long enough to let his time here fade into a dream.

His finger caresses the back of one of Hong Kong's knuckles. He'd be back, but he'd be alone.

Hong Kong once remarked that the irony of this war is that it brought so many nations together. The more Iceland turns the idea over in his head, the more he realizes: his kind don't fear death—they fear distance. Distance from their people when they're away, distance from their kind when they're home, and disincorporation resolves only one problem of the two. It took Denmark months to retrace the steps to his family even when his people ruled unchallenged in the land. With the world as immense and chaotic as it is now, it may take years for Iceland to reunite with any of the nations he's met and grown close to.

And he *has* grown close. He used to think that he could only feel kinship with his brothers, but his months of exile in England have formed deeper bonds with his kind than any meeting ever could. He hasn't made allies, strictly speaking, but he's made *friends*.

And none greater than Hong Kong, who apparently expects Iceland to forget all they've done together once they've parted.

"I want to stay," Iceland says so quietly he can barely hear it himself.

"What?"

"I want to stay. I don't want to leave you."

"...Then why aren't you scared to disincorporate?"

Iceland shuffles forward and reaches out until his hand finds the line of Hong Kong's jaw. He guides his forehead to press against his.

"Because now that we know each other, I plan to find you again."

Hong Kong takes a single shuddering breath. He presses his forehead once, deliberately, into Iceland's before he angles his chin down.

His lips brush against Iceland's so lightly that it feels like an accident. The bottom drops out of Iceland's stomach. When Hong Kong shifts like he's going to move away, Iceland raises his chin and meets Hong Kong's mouth—gently, but firm enough that the touch can't be anything other than what it is.

Hong Kong's lips part minutely, and he returns the kiss.

They part but don't separate, sharing air between them. The hand that retreated into Hong Kong's chest finds its way to Iceland's cheek.

"I thought you had a word for this," Hong Kong breathes.

"Hmm?"

"*Argr*."

"Oh." Iceland breathes out a laugh. "Remind me to tell you how my brothers changed that word singlehandedly."

**BOOM.** Hong Kong startles so hard he knocks his forehead into Iceland's. Iceland shifts himself upward so that Hong Kong's head tucks under his chin, and he wraps an arm around his chest to hold him steady. Iceland's heart is beating wildly, and he's not sure for what reason. He chooses to

believe it's because he's cradling Hong Kong like he never has before.

Hong Kong holds onto him tight. "What are the names of those two people?" he murmurs into Iceland's neck. "The ones who hide during Ragnarök."

"Lif and Lifthrasir."

"Let's be them."

Iceland nods and moves his hand up to stroke Hong Kong's hair. He sees the image Hong Kong is summoning for them: two survivors, cocooned together while the world ends around them.

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The all-clear siren blares at six in the morning, and while Iceland would like nothing more than to return to bed, he sobers and properly wakes at the sight of smoke in the air. London has never been more wounded: the sky has darkened with thick black smoke, and the houses across the street have turned to rubble. Survivors gather their possessions from the wreckage. Iceland watches one woman emerge with a houseplant in each arm.

The six nations in the house look out the parlor windows but make no effort to step outside. When Luxembourg raises a complaint, Hong Kong reminds them that they're refugees themselves and can't take on anyone but their own kind.

The Netherlands stays by the window the longest, his expression unchanged but the air around him mournful. Of them, he's the most powerful nation and he's seen the most of war. Iceland brings him tea in the afternoon but doesn't dare to ask what's going through his mind.

The Netherlands tells him anyway. "Denmark would be helping them."

Iceland sets down the tea tray more shakily than he means to. "You're friends?"

"Of course. He's introduced us once or twice, when you were young." The Netherlands keeps his eyes trained outside. "I'm not surprised he chose to stay behind."

"I wish he were here."

The Netherlands glances at him. "Belgium tells me he's going to make you independent."

"He is."

"Do you think he would teach you anything, if he were here?"

"Yes," Iceland says.

"Hm."

"What?"

"Seems to me he's taught you all he can."

"What do you mean?"

"He raised you." The Netherlands picks up a cup. "He's shared everything he knows just by being near you for so long. But you'll need to know more."



"How did you learn?" Iceland recalls that before England, the Netherlands was the preeminent empire of the world. He'd have more insight than most.

"I went out and saw the world, and what it could do for me."

Iceland considers. His island has always been so small and distant. He has little to trade except fish. "I don't think the world will do much for me."

The Netherlands nods. "You've already learned the first lesson."

"What's the second?"

"Protect what you have."

Iceland wants to ask more, but the Netherlands' jaw has set. Iceland thinks of the path he took to stand in this room, what he lost and had to watch be taken. He leaves to find Hong Kong in England's study.

"Hey," he greets. Hong Kong is examining England's globe in the corner of the room. He turns to Iceland with a small smile.

"It's May eleventh," he says.

"So?"

"As of yesterday, you've been here one year."

Iceland blinks. "Lucky me," he says.

"Was that sarcastic?"

"A little. Mostly because last night was the worst of the Blitz so far."

"Not any other reason?"

Hong Kong presses his lips together. Iceland belatedly puts together some of Hong Kong's thoughts about Loki: how, whether good or evil, he at least lives true to himself.

"None comes to mind," he says. He returns Hong Kong's growing smile.

---

They stir at eleven o'clock that night, tangled up in each other, to the cursed sound of sirens.

"I'm not going," says Hong Kong.

"Don't be ridiculous." Iceland catches the serious expression in Hong Kong's gaze. He apparently hasn't fallen asleep at all since Iceland drifted off. "Why not?"

Hong Kong glances at their ceiling. "There's no electricity."

Iceland sighs. "We can't just stay here."

"Why not?"

"We'd be disincorporated."

"We haven't been so far. And if it happens, I refuse to let the last voice I hear be Slovakia's."

"We still can't stay. We'd worry the others."

"Let them worry." Hong Kong pulls up the blanket tighter around his shoulders.

Iceland yanks it back down. "We won't sleep if you don't want to, but I won't stay here."

After some grumbling, Hong Kong lets himself be dragged down the stairs. They sit on the steps to the cellar, much to the relief of Luxembourg, who gets to sprawl into what was Iceland's spot on the floor.

They trade stories in whispers until the all-clear siren calls, only an hour and a half later. The household stumbles back upstairs and falls back into relieved slumber.

When they listen to the news the next day, the announcer shares news that leaves them speechless: the Germans have focused their air forces on an invasion of Russia. No further attacks are expected.

After eight hellish months, the Blitz is over.

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In mid-June, a black car comes for Iceland. He hasn't ridden in one since he arrived in England.

He rides through the streets at a snail's pace. The reports say sixty percent of the city has been rendered to rubble, and much of it hasn't been cleared from the roads. Camps have been erected atop parks, and scores of men and boys are at work building temporary housing beside the destroyed properties. Still, after a month of relief and good sleep, the Londoners go about their day with casual conversation. The only sign of anything amiss is in the luxury stores near Parliament: the windows are broken but the buildings are untouched, and much of the merchandise is missing.

Iceland knows he's reached Parliament only when he sees Big Ben. He knows it from postcards and Hong Kong's illustrations, and he stares up at it thinking that while it's not as large as the Eiffel Tower, it'd be a behemoth in Reykjavik.

He steps out of the car and is ushered by two MI6 agents down the halls to a room with England and—Iceland gulps—America.

"So here's the little guy, huh?" says America. "How've you been? I hope England's treating you good."

Iceland raises an eyebrow. America is younger than him. Indeed, he's seen America as a child before, albeit not as often as Canada. Yet here he towers over England, his former big brother, wearing a bomber jacket and looking as if he decided to hop across the pond for a chat.

A sardonic thought occurs: maybe one day when he's independent, he'll be taller than Denmark.

"Yes, Iceland, hello," says England as he rises from his desk. He gestures for them to sit, England and America in armchairs and Iceland at one end of a sofa across from them. There's a table between them, but no one brings tea. "You've been well, I trust?"

"Well enough," says Iceland. He looks between the two nations, arguably the most powerful in the world. He straightens his posture. "Are we here to discuss my independence?"

England blinks. Iceland realizes after a beat that England has forgotten. "Er, not quite," he says, exchanging a look with America. "On the contrary, we're here to discuss your occupation."

"I'm still living in your home."

"Yes, it has gotten a bit crowded, hasn't it? And I imagine the Blitz made it no better."

"That's why you're going with me," says America.

Iceland blinks. He shakes his head, as if he has water in his ears. That, or he might be hallucinating. "Pardon me?"

"America's current military capability...well, exceeds my own at the moment," admits England. "I need to devote resources to fighting the Germans, and America has ships to spare. My delegates have a meeting tomorrow to discuss with your Allthing—"

"His everything?" says America.

"His *government*," says England pointedly. He rolls his eyes and looks at Iceland apologetically. "I haven't fully briefed him yet, but I will have by tomorrow. I expect your Allthing to accept my proposal, but it's only courtesy to let you know so you can say your goodbyes."

"My goodbyes?"

"Of course. Since you'll be transferred to America's care, you'll be returning home with him. I should say it'll be much safer there than here in London," England adds matter-of-factly. "Unless you have any questions, then, that's all from me."

"Me too," says America. He turns to England. "Hey, so have you talked to Australia this week? Last I heard, he was..."

And just like that, Iceland has been ejected from the conversation. The walls of the room feel narrower than they were only moments before. Just like a year ago, England hasn't given him a question so much as a command, and barely a polite one at that.

Iceland turns his head between the two of them. They're so preoccupied with this war—a war they have forces enough to fight in, a war they can expect to win rather than endure. Iceland is little more than a pawn to them—this, despite that he's going to be an independent nation. He doesn't feel independent. He feels small.

He thinks of retrieving his suitcase from the bottom of his wardrobe and filling it. This time, Hong Kong will watch him do it. The Benelux siblings and Slovakia will see him off at the door. He'll fly across the ocean and be the only one of his kind apart from this loudmouth coward who hasn't even entered the war but sits here as if he leads it alongside England.

"No," says Iceland.

America interrupts himself and turns to look at Iceland. His expression is curious, but his glasses glint in a way that looks unconsciously menacing. "What was that?"

"No," he says with a swallow. "I won't go with you."

"Well," says England, slightly flustered. "You haven't got much of a choice in the matter, with your navy the size it is."

"I didn't say that. I said I'm not going with America." Iceland turns to America. "I'll be grateful for your protection, just like I am for England's. I've met the others who are hiding from Germany, and I'm glad I'm not one of them. But I want to stay with them here in London."

"Yeah?" America cocks his head. "Are you sure? I hosted Lithuania a while back, and we had a good time. He made the best coffee."

Iceland exhales. He knows the rules: any nation occupied by another comes to live with them. Most become servants. It strikes him how unique a position he's been in: occupied but essentially free. Independent but not. Without family, but supported regardless.

"Suppose America needs something from you?" says England. "Permissions or morale visits or the like."

"You haven't needed that from me yet."

"We don't know what we'll need in the future. This war has turned everything topsy-turvy."

Iceland shakes off the bizarre word. "If the war is changing everything," he says, "then me staying should be a very small change. You're allies, aren't you?"

England and America look at each other. "We're as close as can be for one of us staying out of the war," says England. America rolls his eyes at the jab.

"So, if one of you occupies my land but both of you use it, does it matter which of you I stay with?"

England frowns. Iceland's stomach sinks. If nothing else, England is a man of tradition. He's fought in more wars than Iceland can imagine, and his empire carries on a custom that's been honored among their kind since ancient times: to the victor come the losers.

"Aw, let him stay if he wants," says America. "You've already got so many others here."

"Yes, because their governments came here in exile. Iceland has no legal grounds to keep him here."

"There's no reason to make him go, though," says America. "He can probably do his thing faster from here than from D.C. anyway, right?" He tosses a wink at Iceland, who tries his best not to look flabbergasted. "Besides, don't you have his brother's government here?"

"That's hardly the same—"

"Look, I know he's not the same as Norway." America holds his hands up in surrender. "All I'm saying is, it's no skin off my back if he stays. Our bosses have bigger things to worry about."

Iceland might take offense to the implication that he's not worth the debate if it weren't for America's congenial tone. As friendly as he may seem, though, his voice has an edge to it. America uses the firm tone of a nation coming into his own—one who cares not as much about preserving the world order as about changing it in his favor.

Iceland can see it now: down the road he'll owe some personal debt to America for his protection and indulgence, and he'll have to repay it. By the tilt of his frown, England is in a similar boat. In exchange for more resources—ships, airplanes, rations—England will give larger and larger chunks of control to America. America may not be in the war, but he's navigating politics as if his presence is inevitable.

Let him play these games. Iceland has more to learn if he's going to join in.

England sighs. "Lad," he says to Iceland, "I can't guarantee your safety here."

"We've survived this long."

England quirks an eyebrow at his choice of pronoun. "Alright then," says England. "You should expect the treaty tonight. It'll require your signature."

"I understand." This time, Iceland obeys the dismissal. He stands and nods to them both. "Thank you," he says. It's mostly directed to America.

"Anytime. Let me know if you change your mind," says America. Not *us*, as in him and England. *Me*.

Iceland exhales, then straightens his shoulders. "I won't. But thank you anyway."

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*November 1941*

"You say you've been to Hong Kong."

The art vendor examines Iceland. It's the same man from last year, who gave Iceland the idea to make a paper lantern. Like so many members of the market, he's only restarted selling now that the Blitz seems truly over. And good thing, too—Iceland needs him again this year.

"Briefly, I have," says the vendor.

"Good. If I pay you, will you draw something for me?"

"A commission?"

"I suppose."

The vendor cocks his head. "I remember you. You were with the boy from Hong Kong."

"I was."

"Is he with you now?"

"Nearby, at the bakery. But I don't want him to know we're meeting. It's meant to be his Christmas present."

The vendor folds his arms. "How do you know him? I always see you together."

Iceland squints. "We share a house," he says.

"A house for foreigners?"

"More or less."

"I see." Before Iceland can wonder what kind of small talk this is supposed to be, the vendor leans against his table. Part of the Colosseum postcard is covered by his forearm. "What sort of drawing did you have in mind?"

"Last year I saw your art of the Chinese Venice. Can you make some drawing of Hong Kong like that?"

"Supposing I can, what's your budget?"

Iceland names a price, and the vendor shakes his head.

"I wouldn't normally go so low," he says, "but these are hard times. Give me your address and I can deliver it by Christmas."

Iceland breathes a sigh of relief. He thought that would be much more difficult. He scribbles the address on the back of one of the papers the vendor uses as a receipt, and saunters away just as Hong Kong catches up with him.

"I got these," he says, holding up a paper bag. "The closest I could find to butter rolls, given the lack of butter."

Iceland grins minutely. "Lux—Lucien's going to be so jealous."

"Only if he smells them on our breath. Come on."

Hong Kong leads them to the same park he brought Iceland to on their first shopping trip together. They don't have ice lollies this time—even in summer, the market didn't have the resources to sell them—but all thoughts of frozen cherry syrup leave Iceland's mind the moment Hong Kong opens the bag and they're hit with the steam of fresh, doughy bread.

Iceland grabs one of the rolls and bites into it. He nearly moans. Although the bread lacks much flavor, the warmth and softness of it bring back a nostalgia that's almost a flavor in itself. When he swallows, he says, "It feels so much more like a proper winter than last year."

"The weather's still all wrong for you, I'm sure." Hong Kong hitches his coat up and cups the warm bag with both his hands.

"I'm beginning to appreciate the lack of ice."

"Oh, sure. It's just replaced by nothing but rain."

"You like the rain."

"No."

"No, I know you do. When it rains at night, you're always so calm."

"That's because I'm safe from it in bed."

*With you* lingers between them unsaid. They're sitting side by side, the grocery bags to either side of them on the bench. Sodomy is illegal here, but nations take a broader view of it; after all, with so few women among them and humans so short-lived, the odds are against a more "traditional" pairing to begin with.

Iceland doesn't feel untraditional, though. This kind of relationship is...new, certainly, but being in it with Hong Kong feels as natural as eating or sleeping. It helps, of course, that they do those things together anyway.

Occasionally they get on one another's nerves. Hong Kong likes to chat at times Iceland prefers quiet, like when reading or gardening, and Iceland in turn annoys Hong Kong with his less refined

eating habits. But for every annoyance, there's at least one thing about Hong Kong that Iceland's never known or appreciated in anyone else. He doesn't tease Iceland for clinging in his sleep, unlike his brothers; he only leans into him without even rousing. He seems to read Iceland's moods better than Iceland himself, giving him space when he's annoyed or disheartened by the news on the radio. He's sarcastic and wry, but he always lets Iceland in on the joke.

And then there's this: the times where they sit enjoying the grass and the chill and each other's presence.

Sometimes, Iceland thinks to himself, Hong Kong is so good to him that he wonders what Hong Kong is getting in return. Iceland has asked questions about Asia, about his family, but they've never gone into the same detail as with Iceland's mythology. Then again, there's quite a lot he knows about Hong Kong's present, if not his past. He knows they take the path they do so Hong Kong can check in on his favorite teashop, closed since before Iceland arrived. He knows Hong Kong used to feed ducks at St. James's Park, long before he felt comfortable in England. He knows he takes extra care to nod at the Londoners without English ancestry.

He knows these things because Hong Kong is a person of multiple heritages, and that's something Iceland can never understand completely. He can only appreciate the person he's become because of it.

"What are you thinking about?" asks Hong Kong.

Iceland considers. "How you're a Londoner."

"Oh?"

"Or maybe just a city person. But if you haven't been to Hong Kong in as long as you say, then at what point do you become a Londoner?"

Hong Kong shrugs. "I don't know that I need a label for it. Both places are home."

"Hmm."

"Unless you have a different idea."

"No, it's just..." Iceland shifts so he's facing Hong Kong more than the park. "I don't know that I could have multiple homes like you do. I'm comfortable with my brothers, but I always knew it was *their* home. Our lands were always so different."

"Ah, there's your problem. Home isn't about land."

"Isn't it?"

"Home is people, and memories. You have so many memories of Iceland that it *feels* like your only home. But being with your brothers—doesn't that feel like home too?"

"I mean, we have good memories together. Mostly." There were a few dark periods, most notably when Norway left to live with Sweden for a while.

"That's why you're still here in London," says Hong Kong. "You're waiting for them, instead of going home. Because *they're* home." He takes a final bite of his roll.

Iceland frowns. "That's not...entirely why I stayed."

Hong Kong raises an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, I'd like to see them again. If Den—Matthias has his government here, and Lukas has his king, then maybe they'll come here one day. But I could have waited for them with my own people."

"Then why stay here?"

Iceland looks at Hong Kong levelly. "You know."

They hold one another's gazes for a few moments. Then suddenly, as if a hint of sunlight has slipped through the clouds, Hong Kong smiles.

"I know. I just like to hear you say it."

Iceland elbows him in the ribs, but he's smiling too.

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*December 7, 1941*

Per tradition, the household sits in the parlor to listen to the evening radio news. Against tradition, the news is already midway through an urgent report the moment Hong Kong turns on the radio.

*"—have attacked the Hawaiian naval base of Pearl Harbor at eight o'clock in the morning local time. Hawaii, a protectorate of the United States of America, was targeted by the Japanese without declaration of war—"*

The six nations listen in stunned horror. Iceland's body erupts in chills. America—with the confident, dangerous glint in his eyes—can't ignore this invitation to war.

Of them, the Netherlands looks the least surprised. "He's naïve," he murmurs to Iceland. "He isolated and then overreached. Japan knows war, but he doesn't know America."

"And you do?" Luxembourg interjects.

The Netherlands only shakes his head.

Hong Kong has blocked out the entire conversation, focusing only on the radio for the ninety minutes it takes for the attack to finish. The news trickles in slowly. The attacks began at seven in the evening London time, and while information is scarce even when the attacks end, the reporter reports each piece with a breathlessness not present even during the Blitz.

Eventually, around ten in the evening, Belgium stands and turns the radio off. "The morning newspaper will tell us more than they can," she says firmly. "We should be rested for it."

"No amount of rest will prepare me for whatever American plans to do in return," says Slovakia. All the same, he stands.

The nations bid each other terse goodnights, but Iceland hears the Benelux siblings murmurs even as he shuts the bedroom door. He turns to Hong Kong, who hasn't said a word since the radio turned on.

"Are you alright?" asks Iceland.



Hong Kong takes a shaky breath. "Belgium is right. We need to sleep."

Iceland wants to push, but Hong Kong appears so weary that he can't make himself ask. Instead he settles himself in bed and gently guides Hong Kong's head under his chin, like he did in the Blitz. He hopes his own steady heartbeat will settle Hong Kong's. By the grip Hong Kong has on his waist, he needs it.

Iceland has only just drifted off when he jerks awake. Hong Kong is screaming.

Iceland stares wide-eyed. Hong Kong thrashes on the sheets as if swarmed by invisible insects. His scream is piercing—it rings in Iceland's ears. Hong Kong opens his eyes but remains blinded by terror.

"Hong Kong?" Iceland says sharply. "Hong Kong!"

Hong Kong falls to the floor. To the side, the door flies open and Belgium rushes in in her white nightgown. She kneels on the floor besides Hong Kong, who has stopped screaming but continues to writhe and twitch. Iceland sits up at the edge of the bed and looks on helplessly.

"What's happening?" he pleads.

Belgium looks down at Hong Kong, and then up at Iceland. She bites her lip.

*"—leads the counter-attack, but even with the assistance of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, his troops appear vastly outnumbered against Japanese forces. Bombs fall on Kai Tak Airport a brief four hours after those of Pearl Harbor—"*

Slovakia is standing at the bedroom door, holding the portable radio he received last Christmas. Beside him, Luxembourg turns away as if the sight is too painful. The Netherlands appears as he did beside the radio that evening: in quiet mourning, knowing what will happen now that they're on the path.

"It's Japan," says Belgium softly. She smooths back Hong Kong's hair. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Iceland says. "Why—what do you know?"

Luxembourg shoulders past Slovakia and sprints back down the stairs. The door to his bedroom bangs shut.

"We went through this too," says Belgium. "The attacks. Iceland, there's nothing we can do for him."

"No. No, Japan can't be attacking now, he just attacked America, what use does he have for—"

Hong Kong's eyes fly open, and he gasps. After a few pants, he looks around the room. The radio is still blaring, but Iceland can't hear it. He can only hear Hong Kong, breathing as if he's just run across London.

"I hope it's short. Our battle lasted four days," says Belgium. She looks to the Netherlands, who nods in confirmation.

"I've been invaded before," says Hong Kong weakly. "It's never felt like that."

"It's never been with airplanes," says the Netherlands. "Not with modern bombs. We suffer with our people, but also with our land."

Hong Kong looks at the Netherlands disbelievingly. His head falls back and hits the wooden floor. "Four days. Do you think Japan will stop at four?"

No one speaks. Silently, Slovakia steps forward and sets the portable radio beside Hong Kong's hand. With a bowed head, he turns and leaves for his own room.

"Your brow," says Belgium. "Netherlands, get a cloth."

"No."

Belgium looks at Iceland.

"He's... I'll do it."

"Are you sure?" Belgium looks at Iceland so gently he might cry. "Do you know what this will be like?"

Iceland presses his lips together. "No. But I'll do it anyway."

Belgium looks down to Hong Kong, who pats one of her knees. He tries to sit up, but grimaces and half-collapses back onto the floor. Another wave is coming, and Iceland was asleep and didn't see the buildup to the first one.

Belgium stands and steps to the doorway. She grabs her brother by the arm, and Iceland feels a chill akin to first hearing the words "Pearl Harbor". By the time he's helped Hong Kong back into the bed, Belgium returns with a cool moistened washcloth.

She touches Iceland on the cheek. "You're not alone, you two," she says quietly. "We're here."

Iceland only looks back at her in what he hopes is gratitude. She seems to intuit it, because she presses a kiss to his forehead and closes the door behind her.

Iceland tries to cede the bed to Hong Kong, but by the end of the night, Hong Kong has made it clear he won't stay in it alone. When he wakes up, bleary for newly horrifying reasons, and sees Iceland curled up asleep on the floor, he hoists himself off the bed and nearly falls on him.

Iceland startles awake and curses, but Hong Kong's rasp stills him: "I don't want to end like we started."

*End.*

"When this *ends*," says Iceland, tossing his blanket over Hong Kong, "we can share again."

Hong Kong looks at him steadily. "Humor me until then."

He falls asleep there on the floor, exhausted from a night of shivering and moaning, and Iceland thinks by nightfall that he's forgotten their conversation. He hasn't.

"Bring that over here," says Hong Kong. He points to the bedside table where Iceland has kept his books. Iceland scoots it over. "Now put the radio on it."

Iceland picks up the radio from the floor. "So bossy."

Hong Kong smiles wanly. "The one thing I can control."

"Me?"

"No, my bossiness. I couldn't control you if I held your puppet strings."

Iceland snorts, and sits beside the table so he and the prostrate Hong Kong are facing each other.

Hong Kong frowns. "No. Up here with me."

"If I'm against the wall like usual, I can't get you things."

"We'll switch."

Iceland raises an eyebrow.

"I'll be good, I swear." Hong Kong bursts into coughs, and for one second Iceland thinks he's doing it to underscore how pitiable he is. Then he frowns and turns up the radio for a news explanation.

"This is how it started," says Hong Kong when he catches his breath. "You really do sleep through anything."

Iceland's frown deepens. "Don't let me sleep. Not until you're fine again."

Hong Kong only sighs.

Iceland looks at him, and then sighs in return. "Move over."

---

The attack does not end after four days. It's not an attack, really—it's a battle. News swirls around the room invisibly, drifting in and out of focus with talk of Commonwealth forces lending their soldiers, rerouting their destroyers, and evacuating citizens of note. For every minute spent on the Battle of Hong Kong, though, two are spent on America: his declaration of war on Japan, Germany's declaration on America, the sheer size of America's military, the intentions America has for Britain and Allied Europe.

Iceland doesn't care. He technically belongs to America himself, but America could be—and is—half the world away. Hong Kong is here, beside him, and he's miserable.

The radio mentions Hong Kong neighborhoods Iceland has only heard in passing and countries Iceland has never met. India, Singapore, and Canada are among the nations defending Hong Kong, but it becomes apparent that they're vastly outnumbered. The broadcaster reassures listeners that a British Crown Colony has never fallen to an enemy before. Iceland worries there's a first time for everything.

As with the Blitz, their routine deteriorates into a blur of days that slowly turn into waking nights. Daytime attacks in Hong Kong happen in the middle of the night in London. As such, Hong Kong spends days sleeping feverishly and wakes in the night to suffer through whatever Japan has planned next.

Iceland waits for England to come back to his house. Surely England can take a break from his nonstop strategy meetings with America to see his own colony—the one suffering for lack of defense. But aside from food deliveries from Belgium, no one enters their room.

Hong Kong never screams again, but Iceland doesn't doubt he's in just as much pain. He expresses it in clenched fists that Iceland pries apart and shuddering breaths expelled into Iceland's chest. Sometimes he whimpers, and when he does, he doesn't show his face for several minutes. As if

Iceland could be ashamed of him, as if he wouldn't give away his Edda to make the pain stop.

Roughly a week after the first attack, someone knocks on the door just as they're about to settle in for the night.

Luxembourg stands in the hallway. He seems to pretend there's nothing behind Iceland to see. "We wanted to give you your Christmas present early."

"...Alright."

"Where's that lantern you made him?"

Iceland turns to point to the top of the wardrobe. Luxembourg doesn't follow his finger. Is it some sort of politeness, Iceland wonders, not to see Hong Kong in this state?

Luxembourg reaches into his pocket and pulls out a matchbook and a single candle, the kind you might light in a church in memory of someone. Iceland's stomach turns; that's probably exactly where he got it from.

"To light it," he says, gesturing vaguely in the direction Iceland pointed.

"This is a present for me?"

"You two get a shared present this year," says Luxembourg. He tries for a grin, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Since you share everything else."

Before Iceland can thank him, he turns and makes his way down the stairs.

Iceland makes short work of lighting the candle, and slightly longer work of depositing it safely at the bottom of the lantern. He has a feeling he was supposed to do it in the opposite order. Carefully he deposits the lantern beside the radio and moves his books to the floor.

Hong Kong looks at the lantern and then up at Iceland. "It's beautiful."

"Is it like home?"

Hong Kong pats the spot on the bed beside him. Iceland settles down, probably half blocking the lantern from Hong Kong's view.

"Now it is," says Hong Kong.

They turn off the electric light, and the room glows pale yellow. In a way it reminds Iceland of the cellar, but with the comfort of the bed they share rather than the hard floor. He presses his forehead against Hong Kong's. It's not yet feverish; it's not yet morning in Asia.

"Imagine we're hiding in Yggdrasil," he says. "Like Líf and Lífthrasir."

"What happens to them when the world stops ending?" whispers Hong Kong.

"It doesn't end. It restarts."

Iceland regrets his choice of words only a minute later. The world restarts, but so do its pains. Hong Kong's arms tense, and he tries to control his breathing.

Most nights he only stays tense with an occasional gasp or moan. When the radio reports the North Shore of his main island attacked, he breaks into a sweating fever. The word "execution" becomes

a regular part of the reports, and Iceland needs only one or two examples to understand its meaning. By December 20th, Hong Kong Island is cleaved in half, leaving the British side without water or—increasingly—hope.

Iceland increasingly thinks back to Hong Kong's words: *"I don't want to end like we started."* The heavy weight in his stomach knows what ending he's referring to. Every time the thought tries to surface, he holds Hong Kong a little tighter or dabs his forehead a little more. Once or twice, when Hong Kong looks at him with some amount of clarity in his eyes, they trade soft kisses. They stop after a few, as much because of Hong Kong's health as because of the lump in Iceland's throat.

Iceland is running on three hours of sleep and drifting off in the morning when someone gently taps his shoulder.

Iceland turns, half expecting he'll need to explain himself to England. But it's not England. It's Luxembourg.

"There's someone downstairs for you," he says.

Is Sweden repeating his Christmas visit? Is it even Christmas yet? "Tell him to come back later."

"She asked for you by name."

*She?* The mystery of the word sits Iceland up. Hong Kong stirs for a moment before settling back down. "Send her up. We can talk in the hall."

Luxembourg looks at him worriedly, but leaves. Iceland rests his elbows on his thighs and waits hunched over. The next footsteps he hears belong to two people, and before he can stand to greet them, the visitors step through the open door.

He recognizes them, but in very different ways. One is the artist vendor from the market, looking grim. The second he knows to be a nation, but one he's never met before. She has the same dark hair, eyes, and complexion as Hong Kong, and like Hong Kong she wears simple yet somehow elegant Western attire—a gray dress, in her case. Iceland imagines her with a flower in her hair, and then realizes where he got that image from. His eyes stray to the drawing pinned above the bed.

"You must be Iceland," she says. Her English is accented, but clear.

"Taiwan," says Iceland, quietly so that Hong Kong won't stir. He stands, and Taiwan makes no pretense of peering around him. She examines her brother's face, his shallow but steady breathing, and sighs.

"This has gone on long enough," she says, turning to Iceland.

Iceland sputters. "We haven't—I mean, there's no way you could—"

"Japan has called for surrender twice," says Taiwan. "Both times, my brother's people have refused." Her eyes flicker to him again. "He must have been in such pain."

"No thanks to Japan," says Iceland. He's surprised by how acidic his tone is, but he stands by it.

Taiwan examines him. "It's time for him to come home," she says. "Japan anticipates the surrender of Hong Kong tomorrow, and his presence"—she nods to Hong Kong—"will make it complete."

"Even...even so, he belongs to England."

"He won't," says Taiwan tranquilly. "He'll be transferred to Japan."

"That's why you're here," says Iceland. His eyes widen. "You're here to escort him away." His eyes dart between her and the vendor, who has stood behind her staying nothing, his hands behind his back and his legs apart. Pieces fall together, but he asks anyway: "How did you find him?"

"This man was caught trying to sell intelligence to the Germans. An address," says Taiwan. Iceland suddenly feels lightheaded. "But Japanese spies found him before he could make his report. It seems England has developed a habit of breaking the rules of our kind."

"To *protect* us. Ask the Netherlands downstairs what Germany would have done to him."

"If my brother cooperates, I won't have to." Taiwan clasps her hands before her, looking for all the world like a businesswoman instead of a concerned sibling. The phrase "model colony" passes through Iceland's mind in Hong Kong's voice. This girl has had almost fifty years of Japanese rule; she identifies as much with Japan as Hong Kong does with England.

"Japan is not overly concerned with the fate of the Europeans," says Taiwan. "He only wants what he has won. If Hong Kong returns home, we will ensure that this man"—gesturing to the art vendor—"never shares the address of this home."

"How do I know you will?" Iceland raises his voice. He hopes the others can hear him through the open door.

Taiwan looks at him levelly. "I told you. Japan only wants what he's won. England may choose to ignore the rules of occupation"—she raises an eyebrow at him—"but Japan has more honor than that."

From behind Iceland, Hong Kong murmurs something in Cantonese. All eyes in the room turn to him as he sits up.

Hong Kong asks a question in what Iceland guesses to be Mandarin, or whatever dialect Taiwan speaks. Taiwan returns with a longer sentence, likely an explanation. As she does, Iceland sees her soldier's pose melt bit by bit. She's speaking to her brother for the first time in half a century.

Hong Kong, for his part, looks at her with a sort of resignation. He should be happier to see her, but Iceland supposes this isn't the sister he knew. A niggling part of his brain wonders if this is how he might next encounter Denmark or Norway; he shudders to think of either of his brothers speaking for the Germans who brought half of London to rubble.

The exchanges become shorter. Hong Kong squeezes his eyes shut for only a moment, as if to steel himself. "Iceland," he says.

"You don't have to go," says Iceland immediately. He doesn't know if it's true, but he *feels* it. If he can stay out of America's hands, why shouldn't Hong Kong stay out of Japan's?

"I do," says Hong Kong.

"No. You're England's, right? For another fifty years."

"That's not how it feels." Subconsciously, Hong Kong wraps an arm around his stomach. "It feels like it did in the Opium Wars. Plus or minus a few bombs," he says, eyeing his sister, who frowns sympathetically. "I didn't know what it meant then, but I do now."

"You don't have to listen."

"Even if I didn't," says Hong Kong, "what about you? Me in exchange for everyone else in this house. We'll all be safe."

"These past two weeks haven't looked *safe*." Iceland's eyes sting. He hasn't told Hong Kong how ashamed he is of crying, but they're past that now. They're past so many things. "We'll be fine, but only if you're with us to manage the house and—and garden, and—"

"Iceland."

Iceland meets Hong Kong's eyes, and a tear slips down his cheek. His stomach roils as if he's being attacked himself, but it's only this—only heartbreak.

Slowly, cautiously, Hong Kong stands up. He's shorter than Iceland by an inch, but in that moment, it feels like he's the one looking down on Iceland. One hand finds his waist and the other his cheek, and he pulls Iceland in to place one lingering kiss on his lips. His thumb wipes away another of Iceland's tears.

When he breaks apart, he rests his forehead against Iceland's and breathes in. "I'll see you when I fall asleep."

And then his hands are gone, and he's looking around the room in one slow swivel, and then he nods at Taiwan.

Taiwan turns to the vendor, who in one smooth motion draws a pistol and shoots Hong Kong in the chest.

Iceland shrieks once, as suddenly as the gunshot. Distantly he hears thundering footsteps, hears the Netherlands roar and wrestle the gun from the man's hand, hears Luxembourg gasp, but all these noises are extraneous against the thud of Hong Kong's body onto the mattress. The bullet wound blossoms on his chest, but it's the blood pooling on the mattress that strikes Iceland dumb. Hong Kong's eyes cast around sluggishly until they meet Iceland's. His lips quirk upward, once, and then his eyes are glassy, empty.

In the span of a minute, Hong Kong's body fades, leaving only a puddle of blood and a pile of the nightclothes he was wearing.

Iceland stares at the spot where Hong Kong has disappeared. His chest heaves. He realizes vacantly that the vendor is gone, that the Netherlands and Luxembourg have wrestled him down the hall and locked him in the bathroom. The vendor makes no noise, doesn't pound at the door, but the Netherlands and Luxembourg are still yelling at him as if he's resisting.

Only Taiwan is left, standing beside Iceland.

"I couldn't do it myself," she says quietly. She turns to Iceland and seems to anticipate what he'd say, if he could, if he dared. "And yes, he did have to go this way. The ceremony is tomorrow, right around where he'll reappear."

*Reappear.* She says this so casually, as if Hong Kong hasn't just died. No, not died—discorporated. Iceland tries to think of some other way this could have been. Where Hong Kong is escorted into a waiting black car, the same as Iceland arrived in, while Iceland screams his name. Where Hong Kong is kidnapped at the market when Iceland's back is turned. Where England turns over Hong Kong himself, instead of leaving him to suffer alone and be collected by a girl who surely can't be his family anymore.

All that hiding in the Blitz, and one of them discorporates regardless. All his negotiations to stay,

and it's Hong Kong who leaves first.

If Iceland had the breath, he'd snort. Protect what you have—he can't even do that.

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MI6 arrive at the house around the same time as Belgium and Slovakia return from shopping. They take away the vendor for interrogation, but with Iceland in shock and the Netherlands and Luxembourg occupied with the vendor, Taiwan slips away without capture.

After an hour nursing a cup of tea in the parlor—not the bedroom, not back to the blood, not back to the lantern with its guttering single candle that hasn't yet been extinguished—Iceland speaks enough to explain that their location has been compromised. The MI6 agents look at each other in a way that suggests the vendor already told them this, but they thank him regardless. When Iceland explains who gave the vendor the address that compromised their location, they don't thank him twice.

The six—no, five—nations are given ten minutes to pack. Slovakia goes upstairs on Iceland's behalf and returns with his suitcase. Iceland doesn't give any instructions and accepts the case wordlessly.

They're brought by car to the colonial residences near Parliament. They're less a house than a dormitory; each floor has six bedrooms and a common area with kitchen. Most of the floors have been converted into spillover MI6 operations, but several of the colonies' rooms are vacant and suitable for a temporary placement.

They give Iceland Hong Kong's room, and there he stays.

The next day, Belgium knocks on his door. "Iceland?"

Iceland doesn't respond.

"Iceland, it's alright." She seems to think he's ashamed he displaced them. "We're still together. That's what matters."

A second hissing voice doesn't quite break through the door.

"I'm sorry," she calls more sheepishly. "I know Hong Kong was special to you."

Iceland doesn't respond.

"We'll be celebrating Christmas down the hall. You're welcome to join us."

It's Christmas, then. Iceland pulls the covers up higher. A waft of Hong Kong's incense reaches him.

"Think about it," says Belgium more faintly. Then, footsteps.

When Iceland's side falls numb, he turns away from the wall and looks around the rest of the room. The decor has an unsurprisingly Asian flavor, although it would probably be even more so in Hong Kong. The wardrobe is black with swirls like on his wall scrolls, and everything that can be colored is red. A paper screen with painted flowers that look like lilies stands by itself, partly hiding the one wall with a window. Iceland vaguely wonders why Hong Kong would cover his own window.



Once, late at night, he rolls out of bed, lights a fragrant candle, and kneels beside the bed to open his suitcase. In the candlelight, something glints at him; the metal clasp binding of a large book hidden under the bed. He gingerly pulls it out and sits cross-legged to open it in his lap.

It's Hong Kong's sketchbook. Iceland has never seen it before; most of the drawings he's seen from Hong Kong have been done on separate sheets of paper.

Hong Kong doesn't date his drawings, but Iceland can see his multiple attempts to draw items from what might be his childhood: hairbrushes, spoons, an orchid in a vase. Past the practice pages, the drawings widen into rooms, likely the flat he had in Hong Kong, or else a home he shared with China. He draws less nature than Iceland would expect; he spends the most time on flowers and ferns.

Gradually Hong Kong becomes braver about drawing people. He starts with hands and then delves into faces, and when he sees his first full portrait, Iceland understands why: most of China's personality lies in his expressions, varied between peaceful and animated, and the way his hands always have something in their grip. Taiwan, in contrast, has a wide smile and open palms. Iceland sees illustrations of others, probably more family but possibly simple passerby. Hong Kong occasionally writes names, but only in his own mystifying characters.

It becomes clear when Hong Kong comes to London: he begins to draw Western technology—sewing machines, radios, automobiles—as it becomes commonplace. He becomes interested in clothing, based on his multiple attempts to capture the shading of a top hat. Iceland has to turn several pages before he finds a simple depiction of England frowning as he reads.

Iceland flips to the end, wanting to see what he'd been drawing before he came to play host at England's house. The last image stops his hand.

The drawing is of Iceland. Iceland kneeling and looking softly downward, a lantern illuminating him from the floor. Hong Kong has captured his hand, poised and secure, as it holds a lit match away from the larger light of the flame. He clearly doesn't remember that that night in the cellar, that same match burned Iceland's fingertips.

Iceland's expression in the illustration is serene, with gently open lips and a tilt to his head that nonetheless looks benevolent. Regal, even. Like a bringer of light, rather than the bringer of Hong Kong's death. This is how Hong Kong saw him before he betrayed him.

"Where are you?" he whispers into the darkness.

The darkness doesn't reply.

Iceland closes the book as gently as he can and tries to keep his breathing steady.

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The next day, Slovakia brings him breakfast and tosses a folded newspaper on top of him.

"You'd better look at it or I'm not going to leave."

Iceland rolls over and unfolds the newspaper to read HONG KONG SURRENDERS. Below the headline is an image: a Japanese officer in a white uniform signs a document while a man of European descent looks on. Standing among the generals and reporters, looking wan and impassive, is Hong Kong.

"He's fine," says Slovakia. He knows when Iceland sees him. "Now eat."

Iceland looks up at Slovakia. He thinks he might protest—how can he be fine, half a world away, when Iceland did this to him?—until he sees the hard look on Slovakia's face.

"Don't say anything I haven't heard before," says Slovakia. "And thank your gods we have photography."

Iceland swallows. Once again, he's managed to get something Slovakia hasn't: a picture of someone he cares about, alive and somewhat well even after capture.

"Thank you," says Iceland. His voice feels scratchy, and he clears his throat.

"Thank me by eating."

Iceland half expects they'll have some heart-to-heart, but Slovakia leaves and saves him the conversation.

He finishes the meal Slovakia leaves him, and while his body regains some strength, he still feels hollow. He spends the rest of the day staring at the ceiling.

Some nation he's going to be. That's a thought he hasn't had in some time. The war, his independence—with the Blitz finished and Hong Kong there, both have slipped his mind. He reviews the lessons the Netherlands imparted on him. He'd been focusing so much on lesson two—protect what you have—that he'd forgotten lesson one, the one he internalized upon being ripped from his brothers and brought to London against his will: the world won't do anything for you.

Well, he thinks bitterly, he hasn't done himself any favors either.

He had the best of intentions: a Christmas gift for Hong Kong. That he gave away their address was a childish oversight. Even if he'd withheld it, though, Japan would still have invaded Hong Kong, and Hong Kong would still have suffered those two weeks. Iceland simply made it so that he'd be delivered into the hands of Japan faster.

Delivered by his own sister, Iceland thinks with a shudder. Taiwan was indoctrinated to Japan enough to do his bidding, but not so much that she could pull the trigger. He likes to think of Hong Kong as stronger than that, but who knows how long this war will last? Who knows how long Hong Kong will remain in Japan's fist?

How strange—two years ago, he wouldn't have cared an inch about anything in Asia. The world was so distant and, when he went out into it, so confined. His world was his family.

He looks again to the newspaper, propped up against the glass and plate Slovakia brought him. He won't go so far as to say he's gained a new family. But he's expanded his world.

With that thought, he drifts into an uneasy sleep.

He wakes hours later to the pale light of dawn. Someone must have come in the night, because the dishes beside his bed are gone and his door is left partway open. He hears a low voice down the hall. Odd—he shouldn't be able to hear that distantly. But something about the voice beckons him.

He rises out of bed and decides to stumble into new clothing. He hasn't changed since Hong Kong died—disincorporated—left—...since Hong Kong, and he's starting to smell.

The voice becomes clearer. "—trusted you, I asked you for *one* favor, and you couldn't even keep

him home. I trusted you with my king, but I didn't know my brother was your limit."

"I'm sure I don't know what you—"

"Or even with *you*, England. I know you, I know your spells, but I *don't* know America and I don't trust him as far as I can throw him."

"We need America if we're going to—"

"Did America get me out of Nazi hands? Did America escort me here? I've seen America confuse Sweden with *Switzerland*, and you think—"

"I know you're upset, but if you'd let me finish, I think you'd be—"

Iceland steps out and pads down the hallway in bare feet. He can see the kitchen, unoccupied but with a kettle on the stove, but the living area is blocked from view. He steps into the glaring electric light to see England and—

"*Noregur?*"

Norway's head snaps from England to look at Iceland.

"I was trying to tell you," says England weakly. "His land went to America, but he's still here."

"*Ísland*," breathes Norway. He stands up, sweeps around the coffee table with his usual grace, and locks Iceland in a tight embrace.

Iceland takes one breath—full of pine and sea salt and ale and barley and *home*—and lets out a single sob.

"*Ísland*," Norway repeats breathlessly. He yanks Iceland back by the shoulders to examine him. Iceland immediately turns away, trying to hide his tears. Norway feels over his head, his cheeks, his forehead, his shoulders, checking for injuries and finding none apart from a broken heart. He pulls Iceland back into his chest and lets him muffle his second sob.

"Why are you here?" he murmurs into Iceland's hair. He speaks in Icelandic, and the sound of it draws out another sob and a hiccup. "Why didn't you go home?"

Iceland only shakes his head against Norway's chest. He sniffs loudly and thinks of what a mess he'll make on Norway's shirt if he doesn't pull himself together. Hong Kong would tease him for it. The thought makes his shoulders shake.

"The lad's had a loss," says England, closer than before. He must have stood. "He grew close to Hong Kong, from what I hear. He's staying in his room, if you'd like some privacy."

"Thank you," says Norway in a heavy tone. They don't move for another five minutes, and when Iceland finally looks up, England is gone.

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Norway and Iceland sit side by side on the bed while Iceland explains the past two years. He should have so many questions for Norway in return, but telling everything to someone new—someone who knows him but not his past two years—is such a relief that the words bubble out of him. He talks about the invasion, his shared room with Hong Kong, the Blitz, the Christmas exchange, Sweden's visit, Denmark's letter, the Netherlands's advice. He interrupts himself only

once, to check that Slovakia packed the Poetic Edda in his suitcase. He hadn't even thought to check.

His throat feels like it closes when he reaches the part where he gives the address to the vendor. Norway frowns in confusion until Iceland explains his reappearance.

Iceland gets as far as "he shot him" before he has to stop and take a wavering breath.

"You've never seen a discorporation before," says Norway softly.

"I remember Denmark discorporated once."

"I know. I think I made up some task just for you to go away."

"Collecting arrows."

Norway snorts. "Of course you remember."

Iceland doesn't see the humor. He looks down at his hands.

"I know Hong Kong would have been taken anyway," says Iceland. "But maybe if we'd stayed hidden a little longer..."

"Stop," says Norway. He reaches over and places his hand over both of Iceland's. "You hid for two years. Don't tell England, but that's more than I expected of him." His gaze hardens. "More than he should have left you alone for, if this Blitz was half as bad as you say."

"Sweden said I was brave."

"Sweden needed to justify himself."

Iceland blinks. Of the two of them, he expected Norway to be the one to defend Sweden. Iceland feels a sad sort of mature, that he can understand Sweden's sacrifice for Finland at the cost of the rest of his family.

"Did you see Denmark?" asks Iceland.

"What?"

"I imagine that's why you were gone so long." Iceland re-crosses his legs. "I thought you went to see him."

Norway sighs and looks at the wall. "I wanted to. But I knew there'd be no point to it."

"No point? For all that Denmark would go through to meet up with us?"

"That's different. Denmark's an idiot."

"Denmark loves us. If that makes him an idiot, I'd like to know why you can't be an idiot too."

Norway taps one of his fingers against his thigh. He sighs and looks at Iceland. "You say the Netherlands gave you two pieces of advice about being independent. The world won't protect you, so protect what you have. Right?"

Iceland nods.

"Here's a third lesson. It's been hardest for me to learn, but the truest: what you lose will come back to you."

Iceland scowls. "You're just saying that."

"I mean it. Maybe it won't come back as soon as you think, and maybe not in the form you know it as, but it comes back. Sweden and I came back to you. Denmark will come back to us."

"And Hong Kong too? From halfway around the world?"

"He's done it once, hasn't he?"

"But Japan has him."

"And before that, England, and before that, China. And China probably expects him back, right? He'll come back Western, but he'll return all the same. It's part of our lifespan." Norway folds his legs and turns to face Iceland fully. "You've learned so much, but only over two years. You're a thousand years old, but you haven't seen the world change at that pace because we've kept you away from it. Maybe we shouldn't have."

"Denmark said something similar."

"Denmark said it first. But don't tell him I told you that."

Iceland snorts softly.

Norway leans in. "He and I learned from all our voyages, and now it's your turn. The more you see of the world, the more diverse it seems. But the *longer* you see it, the more you see things repeating. Like a cycle."

"Like Ragnarök," Iceland says suddenly. For nearly anyone else, this would be a tangent. Norway only nods knowingly.

"Like Ragnarök. The gods change, but they return."

Iceland nods slowly. "I suppose this is why you're Odin."

"Oh?"

"That was how I explained it to Hong Kong. You're Odin, and Denmark is Thor."

"I see Denmark, but why am I Odin?"

"Don't make me say it," Iceland groans.

For the first time in this conversation, Norway grins. "Older and wiser than you?"

"No."

"That usually means yes," says Norway. He sits back with a chuckle. As Iceland takes a moment to recollect his dignity, Norway frowns. "If I'm Odin and Denmark is Thor, then who are you?"

Iceland shrugs.

"Hong Kong never asked you?"

"I never told him."

"Fine. Now I'm asking you."

Iceland sighs. "I always wanted to be Tyr, except with both my hands instead of the one. But I felt like Loki."

Norway makes a questioning noise.

"But then Hong Kong said he was Loki first. Mostly because of..." He trails off, but Norway guesses it.

"*Argr.*"

Iceland nods.

"And you felt that too."

Iceland looks away.

"Despite everything you know about me and Denmark?"

Iceland shrugs again. It's hard to erase several centuries of demanding manliness.

Norway leans forward again. "Let me tell you who I think you are."

Iceland looks back at him.

"You're Baldr."

Iceland raises an eyebrow. "Baldr whose main story is about dying?"

"Baldr whose death the gods prevented in every way they could. Baldr who brought light and joy. Baldr who returned at Ragnarök's end when all other gods perished." Norway takes Iceland's face in both his hands and kisses his forehead. "Baldr, the best of us all."

Iceland can't speak for a moment. When he does, his voice is thick. "So you say everything comes back? Every time?"

"I say it," says Norway softly, "but I can't teach it to you. It's another lesson you'll learn as an independent nation."

Iceland nods slowly. Distantly, he hears the squeak of hinges and footsteps in the hallway. His eyes flicker to the door. "If that's so," he says to his brother, "I'd like to introduce you to the ones who taught me everything so far."

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## *Epilogue*

*April 21, 1971*

Iceland stands at the port of Reykjavik, his hands behind his back. The spring air still has a chill, and the wind whips at his back. He's awaiting a ship by military escort.

Really, this should have come much sooner. He's been an independent nation since 1944, a full

year before what has been dubbed the Second World War ended. His government has been stable and his people, if not prosperous, then safe and content. War has not shaken his land nearly as much as it has the rest of the world.

Beside him stands Norway. "You're sure you don't want to wear something more formal?"

"At home, I can wear whatever I please."

"It's an important occasion."

"And I'm *independent*," Iceland intones. "That means no older brothers have been able to tell me what to do for—"

"Twenty-seven years, yes, I know." Norway rolls his eyes. "You remind me of the number every time I visit."

"Am I long-lived enough for another nation lesson?"

"You're long-lived enough when you don't *need* any more lessons."

It's Iceland's turn to roll his eyes.

The Danish ship comes into port, and the people around him—Icelanders, mostly, with a mix of Danes and foreign press in the minority—begin to cheer. All around them wave the blue, white, and red flag that Iceland has claimed since the end of the First World War. He's been ready for this moment for so long.

The naval escort keeps a respectful distance while the main ship comes to dock. The first man bounds down the gangplank and all but collapses onto Iceland.

"Big day, huh?" says Denmark when he pulls away from the hug.

"It's taken longer than it should have," says Iceland.

"I know." Denmark's smile turns a little wistful, and Iceland decides to go easy on him. He's relatively unscarred from the war, but no nation has truly recovered—not even the one Iceland once thought of as mighty Thor.

"Thank you," says Iceland. "I'm ready to have it back."

"I know," says Denmark, lighter this time. "You didn't have to send *that* many pictures of the museum, you know."

Iceland blushes, and Denmark laughs and ruffles his hair. He focuses his grin on Norway, who's been watching the exchange silently. Almost invisibly, Norway returns his smile.

The three of them stand to watch the crate wheeled gently down the gangplank. The crate itself is unremarkable, but Iceland's heart flutters anyway.

"*The gods in Ithavoll meet together,*" quotes Norway in the old language they once shared, "*and the mighty past they call to mind, and the ancient runes of the Ruler of Gods.*"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure that's in there," says Denmark.

"The Codex Regius," whispers Iceland as the crate passes him. The document containing the original Poetic Edda. The copy he shared with Hong Kong has grown worn and tattered, but he

can't bear to replace it like he's done so many other copies. Having the original document here—home, after four hundred years in a Danish library—makes his chest swell with pride.

The crate is escorted to a waiting car, where it will be driven to the museum and installed in an exhibit. There will be a reception at the museum itself, but the entire nation of Iceland will celebrate.

Iceland makes for his own car to follow—he's expected, after all—but Denmark holds him back with a hand on his shoulder.

"I told you things return," says Norway at his other side, "but *Danmark* thought he might underscore the point."

He nods back to the ship. Iceland pries his eyes from the disappearing car to see two figures at the top of the gangplank, waiting for the signal to walk down.

The first is England, who stands with all the balance and grace of the former pirate he is. His thick eyebrows are unmistakable, his small smile and nod less familiar but welcome all the same.

To his side, standing shorter but still proud, Hong Kong examines Iceland with folded arms. When he realizes Iceland is looking back, his shoulders jolt and still. Slowly, a grin spreads across his face.

Iceland is halfway up the gangplank before he knows it. Hong Kong meets him halfway down, and without even a moment for inspection, they fall into a kiss.

For a moment, Iceland can't breathe. The gangplank sways unsteadily—or maybe he does, from the rush of blood to his head.

When they separate, they exhale shakily.

"This is unfair," Iceland murmurs. He nods to Hong Kong's feet on the higher part of the gangplank. "You can't be taller than me."

Hong Kong snorts a laugh, and that's the moment Iceland knows he's unchanged. So many things have been altered by the war, but not this, not them. They were forged by it.

"So," says Hong Kong. His eyes flicker to the streets of Reykjavik, where the Poetic Edda is finally returning to its people. "Aren't you going to show me what all the fuss is about?"

"You're right." Iceland leans in once more and pecks Hong Kong on the lips. "If I'm not careful, you might start to think it's about you."

"Isn't it?"

Iceland closes his eyes and smiles. The people on the streets don't know, but somehow the celebration is imbued with even more meaning.

"Come on," says Hong Kong. "Tell me what I want to hear."

"You know."

"I know."

Iceland meets his eyes. "I'm glad you're here."



And then he leads them to shore.

## End Notes

I've worked to be as historically accurate as I can, but I allowed myself one big plot hole. By my own rules, Belgium and Luxembourg wouldn't have been well enough to greet Iceland on his first morning in England's house, considering they were being invaded at the time. I didn't want to rewrite the scene. No one's paying me to be 100% accurate.

Apart from extensive use of Wikipedia (I probably owe them a donation), I used the following books and links.

- For information about the Blitz: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/the-blitz-eight-months-of-terror/z7dyxyc>
- For information about European occupation: [https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/world-war-ii-history#section\\_3](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/world-war-ii-history#section_3)
- For King Haakon's Christmas address (directly quoted): <https://royalcentral.co.uk/europe/norway/king-haakons-christmas-speeches-to-an-occupied-norway-134221/>
- For Hong Kong's and Norway's recitations of Völuspá (directly quoted): <http://www.voluspa.org/voluspa1-5.htm> and <http://www.voluspa.org/voluspa56-60.htm>
- For all other reference of Norse mythology: Norse Mythology (Neil Gaiman), The Poetic Edda (Oxford World Classics)
- Inspiration for the "Venice of China": <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/01/06/zhouzhuang-china/>
- Inspiration for the opening scene (and other Nordic tidbits): <https://satwcomic.com/hurry-hurry-hurry>
- For help getting the story unstuck at various points: <https://blog.reedsy.com/dan-harmon-story-circle/>

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