Summary

Based on the following "Imagine Loki":


Imagine Loki, after losing the battle of NY, escapes and finds a dead man and assumes his identity in order to keep himself hidden. When he finds his home, he discovers that the man has a wife and two small kids. He tries to his best to fit in and act normal. The kids, he is good with and can handle really well. But it becomes really difficult when the wife wants to be intimate with him, and she’s quite comely. He struggles with the morality of it, but ultimately gives in and begins to have sex with her on a regular basis. He convinces himself that he’s doing it to help keep his disguise, but in truth, having been starved of physical affection of any kind in the recent times, he craves it badly. It slowly becomes an indulgence, and Loki finds himself partaking in it more often than was usual for him. The wife is pleasantly surprised by her usually reticent husband’s renewed interest in her and their kids, and she feels happy for the first time after a long long while. He no longer fights with her or goes off on his own for days on end.
Falling off the Face of the Earth

Loki had managed to throw them off long enough to teleport out of Tony Stark's penthouse.

"If it's all the same to you, I think I'll have that drink now," was all he said. It was all he could say after that green beast has shaken, beaten, and smashed him into the floor in several places. His would-be captors were slightly taken aback, so that even in his weaken state he could get away.

Anything would be better than the prison that surely awaited him on Asgard. The only thing worse than a prison cell would be the disappointment in his mother's eyes when he was brought back in chains. No, he needed to disappear. This was New York City, for Norns' sake! It was the most populous city on this continent. Surely there were any number of individuals who's identity he could assume. He could just blend in. Disappear. He would bide his time until he was strong enough to conquer Earth the way that he wanted to, not the way that ham-fisted, purple skinned maniac wanted.

He would have time to think about his comeback later. Right now, he had to find someone to impersonate. In his flying about on the Chitauri vehicle, he had spotted several hotels. He decided to go search there; hotels meant travelers. It was best for him to put some distance between this city and himself as quickly as possible. He teleported to one of the nicer establishments and began to wander about the wreckage. While Loki could use his shape-shifting abilities to disguise himself as literally anyone, he needed to conserve his strength. The less he had to do to change his appearance, the better off he would be. Things like complexion and facial features were easy to shift. Height and build, however, could be more of a challenge. "How hard can it be to find a Midgardian about my height and build?" Loki thought.

Apparently, it was more difficult than he expected. "Midgardians are so...small. Such variety, too!" The one creature he had found that came even remotely close appeared to live in the very city he was attempting to escape. That wouldn't work for him. Loki, as he continued his search on foot, got to see first hand the carnage wrought by the attack. A tan coat of fine-looking material caught his attention among the debris. He walked over where the man lay. Next to him were was a small case with short handles and a shoulder strap. This case contained a notebook computer, several folders, and some writing implements.

"Now. Let's see what my new face looks like." Loki rolled the man over and studied his face. He had short, light brown hair, skin that was tanned from much time outdoors, and Loki pulled lids of his large eyes opened to reveal that they were a light hazel. He had slightly fuller cheeks and a heavier jaw; which overall gave him a rounder face than Loki's. The man had a strong chin, not too prominent nose, and was sporting a neatly trimmed goatee. His dark blue suit underneath the coat was nicely tailored and his shoes had been polished to a high gloss.

To be less conspicuous, Loki hefted the man's body over his shoulder and carried him into a nearby alley. He removed the man's wallet from an interior pocket in his jacket. The man's name was "John Robert Collins" and, according to his driver's license, he was from Redmond, Washington. His wallet contained several rectangular pieces of plastic that Loki had identified as a portable source of financing among the citizens of Midgard. A slot in the wallet also contained higher denominations of the paper currency that was used by the people of this land.

He found a small silver case in his breast pocket, containing business cards. In bold lettering at the top was a logo of some sort that read, "Collins, Harper, & Stiles." The next line read, "John R
Collins.” Below that, in smaller print, read "Attorney.” Loki thought for a few minutes, digesting the information to be gleaned from the contents of the man's pockets. He was an attorney which meant that this man was a practitioner of the law! Asgard had no similar profession, although there were solicitors and courtiers aplenty. Loki found it quaint that Midgardians devised a legal system by which to pass judgment on cases before a court populated by one's peers. He could just imagine how a despot like Odin would react to such a notion! Even if such a legal system lacked efficiency, Loki supposed that being one to argue cases before a judge and jury would suit his talents perfectly. He wasn't called "Silvertongue" for nothing!

Further inspection of the late Mr. Collins' belongings revealed that he had been staying at The Regency and had attended a business conference for the last week. Also in the man's possession had been a ring of keys containing a key to an automobile and several smaller keys, most likely his home and place of work. His mobile communication device indicated that he had seven missed calls from someone named Lauren. Loki began to remove the man's clothing, noting that his cause of death appeared to be from internal injuries. Aside from a few minor cuts on the back of his head and one on his cheek, there were no visible wounds. The man wore an expensive-looking timepiece on his left wrist, and a simple gold band on the fourth finger of his left hand. "Ah, he is married," thought Loki. That solved the puzzle as to who Lauren was. As a rule, Loki disliked the idea of wearing a dead man's clothes. However, he didn't want to expend anymore of his strength than was necessary to shift into his adopted form.

Replicating the man's appearance would be easy, but Loki still needed to hear his voice. It didn't take long for Loki to figure out the workings of his (John's) smartphone. He went through all of the apps. While perusing the dead man's phone, an alert popped up on the screen. It was a flight confirmation alert: the man's scheduled flight from JFK to Sea-Tac had been delayed to the following day. Loki finally reached the voice mail portion of the man's phone. He listened to all of the messages left by Lauren. Most of them revealed the woman had a pleasant voice, full of love and light for the man she was addressing in her verbal messages. They progressed from cheerfully benign, to angry annoyance, to panicked sobbing.

"Hi, honey! It's me. I know that you're probably checking out of the hotel. I just wanted to say that I love you, and I can't want to see you at home. Call me when you get to the airport."

"Jack, it's Lauren. I don't know if you've seen the news, but there is something going on in Manhattan right now. Maybe you should stay put until it's safe to leave. I love you."

"Baby, it's me again. I'm sure the cell towers are down, but I just wanted to see if you were alright. Please call me when you get this. I love you."

"Jack? Please call me as soon as you get this. They say all flights are canceled at JFK, and I'm worried about you. Call as soon as you can."

"Jack, you're really worrying me. You need to call me. Like, now!"

"Jack! This is the last time that I'm calling you! You never answer your fucking phone! I need to hear your voice right now!" Loki couldn't help but chuckle at the juxtaposition of the woman's tone and her desire to speak to the man. However, his laughter died off as he heard the final message.

"Jack, please answer! I haven't heard from you in four hours now! All I know is what I see on the TV! Please answer me! I need to know that you're safe! I'm so scared!" the woman's voice sobbed.

It wasn't until he had heard all of the voice mails that Loki realized that an outgoing message had
been recorded. He held the phone to his ear and listened. The man's voice was not unpleasant, but had a tone of arrogance that Loki found amusing for a mortal. He spoke with a hint of what Loki understood to be an accent unique to the southern portion of this country. In no time at all, Loki found that he could impersonate Jack Collins' smooth baritone drawl. His own clothing stowed away in a parallel dimension, Loki shape shifted into Jack Collins. He looked down at the man, whose remains were now only clad in his undergarments. "That was the easy part," thought Loki. He turn on his heel, taking up the dead man's computer bag and headed toward The Regency.
Rest and Reconnaissance

As he walked, Loki considered his options. He could leave New York, using the man's identity and airline ticket. He could assume a different identity with this man's appearance, leave New York by other means, and find somewhere else to hide. Or, he could stay in New York and hide in plain sight. Loki immediately ruled out the last option; the dead man's business was finished in this city, and Loki didn't have enough information to invent a plausible excuse to explain his extended stay to the people who would miss the man. Using the dead man's appearance and inventing a new persona for him would take time and resources that Loki did not have. Jack Collins was a man of means, but to use his financial means to create a fake identity would surely be discovered and leave a trail for SHIELD to follow. No, Loki's best option was to leave New York as Jack Collins. Then what?

Loki's mind wandered back to the woman's voice on the phone. Pity was a base sentiment, but there he was, feeling sorry for the woman who had lost her husband without even knowing it. He thought that it would be cruel to leave the woman wondering what became of her husband. "Is it any more cruel that letting her believe that her husband is still alive? Maybe, I can fake a death for Jack Collins when it is time for me to move on? That's it! Jack Collins can meet his untimely demise another day. Meanwhile, I can recover and set up a life of my own elsewhere." Loki was already formulating a plan to create an alias that looked like himself, bank accounts, maybe even purchase a compound somewhere secluded to act as a base of operations. Jack Collins had clearly not been a pauper, so how hard could it be?

The only obstacle between him and achieving this was playing the role of husband. Given what he had heard on the phone, Loki knew that he could not simply board the flight tomorrow and drive to that man's house. He needed to appear as normal as possible. The God of Mischief had no practice in being a husband. What would a married man do in this situation? He decided that most men would make some effort to contact their wives to assure them of their safety. Loki steeled himself for what was to be the performance of his life thus far: he removed the phone from his coat pocket and had it dial the number belonging to Lauren.

For Lauren Collins, it had started out as another beautiful Friday morning in the Pacific Northwest. As usual, she woke to see the first rays of dawn paint the sky over the tops of the evergreens that surrounded the lot on which their house sat. Having wooded acreage was a blessing, as it gave her children a place to play outside beyond the limits of the professionally manicured lawn. Her husband had always seen it as a waste, preferring to be closer to the city or in Seattle proper, but Lauren had begged and cajoled until he relented and bought the house after the birth of their son. Lauren took her shower and got ready for the day before she woke the children to get them ready. Her son was in elementary school; her daughter in pre-school.

The promise of that day had shattered into a million pieces while they were having breakfast. Her son Rylan had been sitting at the breakfast table, eating his cereal as he feet swung back and forth with the nervous energy so typical of six year old boys (even well-behaved, studious boys like him). Her four year old daughter Olivia was in her booster seat, also eating cereal, while Lauren scurried about the kitchen to make her coffee and spread cream cheese on her freshly toasted bagel. Both of them had wavy brown hair like their father, but Rylan had his mother's aquamarine eyes while Olivia had her father's hazel ones. Both children were excited that their father was coming home from his trip.

The small TV mounted to the bottom of one of the kitchen cabinets played one of the local
morning news shows. Just then, the regularly scheduled program was interrupted by the national news. The news anchor sat grimly at his desk and began reporting that New York City was currently under attack by an invading alien army. Lauren swiftly moved to turn off the television; she certainly didn't want to upset the children. "Hey, what do you guys think about staying home today? We can bake some cookies for Daddy to welcome him home. Would you like that?"

Rylan and Olivia both lit up at the mention of their father. Even though Jack would work late into the night and had been spending less and less time at home, the children adored him. To them, any time with Daddy was a great time. There was no denying that Jack was a loving father...when he was around. It was the getting him to stick around part that was a challenge lately. Lauren had felt terrible about the argument they had before he left for New York. Even though they had spoken on the phone and apologized to each other, she had an awful sense of foreboding. She sent up a silent prayer as she watched the kids take off their shoes and settle in with Paw Patrol on the TV in the living room. *Please. Please let him be alright.*

Four hours later, Lauren had been trying desperately to reach Jack. A few times, the call went straight to his voice mail. She inhaled deeply, fighting the urge to scream. She needed to keep it together for her kids, but after the sixth voicemail, she wanted to punch a wall! How could he do this to her? Lauren had stayed in the kitchen with the TV on mute and the closed captioning turned on as she watched the news reports. A giant hole in the sky. Alien warriors and their giant beasts attacking skyscrapers, shooting at fighter jets. Iron Man and a handful of other people fighting back. People screaming and running in the streets. Then, she saw *him.* The being that was responsible for the attack. He didn't look like an alien. In fact, he looked nothing like the creatures that he was leading. This man wore a golden horned helmet, gold armor and black leather covered his body with a flowing green cape. His eyes were either blue or green. In any case, the man was handsome in a not-of-this-world sort of way. What he was doing though, repulsed Lauren.

Still, all of these thoughts were second only to the question at the center of her world: Is Jack okay? She was about to call the survivors’ hotline to give them his information when her phone began to buzz. As she looked at the screen, her husband’s smiling face appeared under his name. She sobbed out a sigh of relief. Hot tears flowing freely, she answered the call.

"Jack, honey, please tell me that you are alright!"

"Lauren, sweetheart, I am so very sorry that I was not able to call you earlier. I got caught in the middle of the battle."

Lauren's breath hitched in her throat. "Oh my God! Baby, you aren't hurt, are you?"

She heard Jack begin to chuckle. "Not any more than expected. I was hit with some debris, but I will be fine. I did better than a lot other people."

The realization that her husband might have lost his life that day made Lauren sink to her knees in the middle of the kitchen. She began to sob into the phone. She heard Jack's voice through the speaker. "Sweetheart, what is wrong?"

Just then, Rylan and Olivia came into the kitchen. "Mommy, why are you crying?" said Olivia as tears began to form in her big eyes.

Lauren hastily wiped her tears, took a breath, and reached out to her children. "It's okay, lovelies. Mommy is just happy that Daddy is alright. Here, come say 'hi' to Daddy."

Loki froze at what he just heard. He heard a tiny voice in the background then heard the woman's
voice suggest that it "come say 'hi' to Daddy." *This man was a father, too? Norns! How much more complicated can this possibly be?* Loki didn't have time to contemplate an answer because he soon heard that same little voice speaking to him. "Daddy? When will you be home? We miss you!"

He had to swallow a lump of nervousness before he answered. "I will be home tomorrow, little one. Daddy's flight was canceled, but I will be home as soon as I can. Alright? Can I speak to Mommy?"

The little voice said, "Love you, Daddy. Here. Rylan wants to talk to you."

*Rylan? Who is Rylan?* The answer came when Loki heard a boy's voice on the other end. "Daddy! Are you coming home soon?"

*Did I not just have this conversation?*

"Yes, son. I will be home as soon as I can. My flight was canceled so I have to wait until tomorrow."

The boy sounded disappointed. "Oh. Can we go to the lake? I want to use the fishing pool that Pappy gave me for my birthday!"

Loki was about to answer the boy, when he heard Lauren's voice gently scold him. "Rylan, your father will be very tired from his trip. We can go to the lake next weekend. Please say good-bye to Daddy and let me talk to him."

"Bye, Daddy! Love you!"

Loki was gobsucked to hear children's voices telling him "I love you." It would definitely take some getting used to. Not that he was planning to linger very long as Jack Collins; Loki figured that he needed maybe six months to get his affairs in order. His thoughts were interrupted by the woman's voice. "Jack? I heard you say that your flight was canceled?"

"Oh. Yes, darling. I got the alert on my phone. It has been re-scheduled for tomorrow at 10:30."

Lauren sighed. "Well, I'm just glad that you are alright. Where are you now?"

"Now? I am walking back to the hotel. Hopefully, it still stands. I am exhausted and need to sleep. I cannot wait to get out of here." Whether pretending to be Jack Collins, or as himself, Loki was telling the absolute truth. He *did* hope that the hotel was spared. He *was* exhausted. And he *could not wait* to get out of there.

"Alright, baby. I will let you go, then. Call or text me when you get to the hotel, alright? I love you."

Loki was not certain how to conclude the call. It felt awkward to simply end the call, especially when faced with the warmth the woman's voice and her palpable relief at hearing her husband's voice. The words were strange in his mouth as he said them, "I will let you know when I am there. I love you, too."

Lauren was not surprised to hear the stiff discomfort in Jack's voice as he said "I love you." She felt that they had, in recent months, been growing apart. It was more than just the time that Jack spent away from home on business. Even when he was around, he never seemed present. The kids were able to get some of his attention, but Lauren always felt that any attempts to spend time, just the two of them, had become a chore to Jack. Lauren shook it off. There would be time to
Loki almost cried tears of joy at seeing the hotel in which Jack Collins had been staying was still standing. As he entered the lobby, Loki saw that the ground floor had become a makeshift shelter. He saw a little man in a green and gold uniform scurrying about, picking his way around people who were sitting and standing in the middle of the floor. Loki assumed that he was an employee of the establishment, so he flagged him down. "Excuse me?"

The little man turned, his face flush and dripping with sweat. "Yes, sir. How may I help you?"

Loki noted that the little man's tone were incongruous with the words he spoke. He sounded like the very last thing he wanted was to help yet another person who had wandered in off the street. All Loki wanted was to know the state of things in the hotel. "I am sorry to be a bother. I am a guest here and just returned from out there," Loki pointed toward the doors. "Am I still able to stay in my room until tomorrow morning? Also, I will need to arrange transportation to the airport tomorrow morning."

The man's demeanor changed slightly, knowing that Loki was a paying guest of the hotel. "Yes, sir. You are able to stay here. Power was just restored an hour ago, so you will also have water in your room. As for transportation, you may wish to speak with our concierge." The uniformed man gestured toward a woman of slightly middle age, also dressed in a uniform, who was busily answering phones behind a counter. Loki gave the man a smile as he drawled out, "Thank you for your help."

The concierge, a woman named Lena Harper, was especially helpful. She acted as if she knew the man he was now pretending to be. Looking at him coyly from beneath her heavily made up eyelids, "Leaving so soon, Mr. Collins? Are you sure that we cannot convince you to stay through the weekend?"

Loki recognized the implied invitation and the look in the woman's eye. Jack Collins had apparently used the concierge's "services" for entertainment of a more personal nature. Infidelity was not a shock to Loki's sensibilities. In the past, he had been party to it on more than occasion; some of the high-born ladies at court were so very bored with their husbands. Tempting as the offer was, Loki had not had a woman in his bed for years, he only wanted rest and quiet. "No, thank you, Ms. Harper. Today has been a very trying day. I need to rest."

The look on the woman's face became frosty. "Oh. Well, thank you for staying with us, Mr. Collins," she said in a clipped manner.

Turning from the concierge's desk, Loki wove through the crowded lobby to the elevators. It wasn't until he reached Jack's room and closed the door behind him, that Loki allowed himself to relax. Shifting back into his own form, he shucked the dead man's clothes from his body and drew himself a hot bath in the large tub. As he soaked, Loki contemplated his strategy from here on out. Undoubtedly, security would be tight throughout the city. The advantage of shapeshifting was that he took on all the characteristics of whatever he became; it was also the largest pitfall of shapeshifting. While in a human form, Loki was vulnerable to all the maladies of their race. However, he would be able to easily pass through whatever security measures SHIELD could devise in such a short time.

He needed to learn as much about his new life as he could. The man's computer was no doubt a wealth of information, as was his phone. After stepping out of the tub and drying himself off, Loki removed the device from its bag. He powered it on and was greeted with a log-in screen. Damn. What would he have used as a password? Loki began to work on a solution, involving a spell to
learn all of the man's passwords based on the "memories" of the computer itself. Every object, magical or not, was imbued with imprints of whoever had used it previously. Not only would Loki have the password to access the computer, but for the man's email accounts and bank accounts. It was only a matter of minutes before every detail of the man's life to be found on the computer was laid out before Loki for his perusal.

The computer contained mostly work-related information: the cases on which the man had been working, correspondence between him and colleagues or clients, *et cetera*. The little bit of personal information came in the form of photos saved to the computer. There were pictures of the man with his family, in which Loki noticed a very strong resemblance between the man and his children. The son's eyes, though, were definitely not from Jack Collins. Loki scrolled through the photos, until his eyes fell upon a photo of Jack with his arm around the shoulder of a smiling woman. This woman's eyes were so much like the boy's that she was no doubt Lauren Collins.

Loki stared at the woman's kind face, dominated by large aquamarine eyes and a brilliant smile. Her smooth, cream-colored skin was dusted with faint freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her hair was a thick mane of fiery red hair that fell in loose curls past her shoulders. In the photo, she and Jack appeared to be at some formal event. He was wearing a black suit and tie; she was wearing a midnight blue dress that accentuated her shapely figure. She was no waif, being the mother of two children, but she appeared to be strong and womanly. The woman was average height for a Midgardian, since her head was at Jack's shoulder in the photo.

If her likeness in the photo was even remotely true, Loki knew that he would be hard-pressed to resist the temptations that would come with living under the same roof as her. He did not know if marital customs of Midgard's well to-do were the same as on Asgard. He only hoped that they were, so that he would have a separate room in which to sleep. Sharing that woman's bed would be nothing but torture for him. It was bad enough that he was impersonating the woman's husband; even Loki was squeamish at the idea of bedding her, given the circumstances.

Loki continued to use Jack's phone and laptop to learn all that he could. He learned that Jack's children were ages six and four. He learned that Rylan played several Midgardian sports and that Olivia was in dance classes. Both children were fond of drawing (as evidenced by the number of photos taken of their artwork) and of playing with the family's dog who appeared to be a four-legged version of Thor. Looking at Jack's calendar, he had a vacation scheduled in three weeks time. Loki noticed that many of the text communications between Jack and Lauren were of perfunctory, almost business-like, in tone. They almost entirely consisted of discussions about meal plans or matters concerning the children. This puzzled him, but then again, Loki assumed that more amorous feelings were probably better expressed verbally or in handwritten missives. By the time Loki was ready to retire for the evening, he felt that he had enough of an understanding of Jack Collins to pretend to be him in the short-term. He went to sleep, ready to begin his new (albeit temporary) life far away from this place.
Loki awoke before the sun had risen to make sure that he would have adequate time to travel the distance from the hotel to the airport. According to the concierge, a shuttle bus would pick up him and other hotel guests at 8:00 sharp. That means he had plenty of time to prepare for his day.

Loki, as a prince of Asgard, had done a great deal of traveling. However, he had always been accompanied by a large retinue of servants and members of the court. Even as the junior prince, Loki's smallest entourage consisted of no less than six servants...and he never, ever, had to pack his own luggage.

Now, here he stood. Loki, God of Mischief and Chaos, in the guise of one John Collins having to pack his own bags. "My, how the mighty have fallen," Loki thought with more than a hint of irony.

It is not as if packing this man's clothing and personal items was especially difficult. It was the principle of it. However, as with many of the events that had transpired in the last few years, Loki was reminded that patience was a flower he needed to cultivate in his own garden. After showering and packing all but the clothing he needed for the day, Loki shifted into the form of Jack Collins. He needed to dress himself in Jack's slightly smaller frame and get accustomed to how it felt being human. Loki had found his visual and aural acuity lacking as a mortal, which took a small period of adjustment.

Loki gathered up his luggage and left the hotel room. He had plenty of time to check out of the hotel and have breakfast in one of the hotel's restaurants. The dining room was abuzz with people, both guests of the hotel and refugees from nearby apartment buildings that had been destroyed in the attack. He was finishing his coffee when he heard a voice shouting across the restaurant, "Jack! Where the hell have you been?"

A younger man, dressed in a button down shirt and tan slacks, came over to join him. It was clear from his manner that this interloper knew his alter ego. The expression on Loki/Jack's face must have caught the young man off-guard because he paused before taking a seat at the table and continuing to speak. "Jack? It's me, Chester."

"Ah, yes. The junior partner that Jack was mentoring." Loki had seen that name come up frequently in the email correspondence that he read through last night. Chester Mathison had only just been made a junior partner at the firm a year ago and seem very eager to prove his value and climb the ladder. He had never had an apprentice before, but Loki was not so far removed from his own experiences as an apprentice that he couldn't recognize a bit of himself in this young mortal. He knew that hunger for success very well and appreciated it. Chester may prove to be a valuable asset. For now, Loki just needed to play along. He smiled indulgently at the younger man as he said, "Chester, it's good to see you. I see that you survived yesterday's excitement."

"'Yesterday's excitement?' Jesus, Jack! The last time I saw you, you looked like you were on your way out, if you follow me. What the hell happened?"

"I was knocked unconscious. Luckily, the debris that fell over the top of me didn't land on me. It sheltered me from the worst of it," Loki had made sure to replicate Jack Collins' external injuries enough to make his story plausible. A deep cut on his left cheek, a split lower lip, and bruises all over his body were sure to do the trick. Loki continued in Jack's southern drawl, "So, what did I miss?"

That was all the invitation that Chester needed to launch into his tale of being caught inside a building, surrounded by Chitauri, then being rescued by Captain America. Loki marveled at the young man's ability to tell a story without taking so much as a breath, the words simply cascading...
out of his mouth. Loki was only half-listening, though. The rest of his focus was on observing the people that came in and out of the hotel's lobby. It wasn't long before Loki saw men and women in those ubiquitous dark blue and black uniforms: SHIELD had arrived on the scene.

The uniformed men and women fanned out and began talking with people, questioning them as to whether or not they had seen the fugitive war criminal Loki. When a pair of young agents approached their table, they didn't even give Loki a second glance as he answered that he had not seen much after being knocked unconscious during the attack. The agents moved on to the next table; Loki kept Jack's face stoic as could be. It was a wonder that Thor himself was not combing the city right now. There wasn't a doubt in Loki's mind that if Thor had been commanded by the All-Father to remain on Earth for however long it took for him to bring Loki back to Asgard. The God of Mischief was almost disappointed at the prospect of not getting to slip by his brother...correction, adopted brother.

Chester's voice interrupted Loki's thoughts, "Hey, Jack! It looks like our ride is here. Ready to go?"

Loki smiled at the young man, "Yes, of course. Let's head to the airport."

They handed off their luggage to the driver and boarded the shuttle bus. This cramped conveyance was to take them through the damaged streets of New York to the airport. With any luck, they would make it to the airport in time for their flight. Loki removed his phone from his coat pocket, noting that there was a text message from Lauren. It read, Good morning, baby! Let me know when you get to the airport. Tell Chester I said "hello." Love you!

Loki turned to the younger man smashed into the seat next to him. "Lauren says hello."

Chester grinned in response, "I don't know how you do it. You have a gorgeous wife, cute kids, great job, and a beautiful home. I still think that you made a deal with the Devil to be so lucky."

All Loki could do was chuckle at the young man's speculations. Considering the circumstances, Loki found them all the more humorous. The rest of the passengers finally crammed on to the shuttle, they pulled away from the hotel and bounced along the damaged streets. Their route was circuitous, since some streets were impassable. It took over an hour to reach the airport. When the shuttle disgorged its passengers, Loki had to choke back a gasp of surprise. Flanking either side of the entrance to the building were the metal man and Thor. The metal man was holding some device out to the people passing through the entrance. Suddenly, the phrase "be careful what you wish for" popped into his head as he was reminded of his musings from earlier that morning.

Loki arranged his borrowed facial features into a veneer of calm as he took up his luggage and walked with Chester to the sliding glass doors. Loki hopes of passing by without incident were dashed when Chester rushed up to Tony Stark with an outstretched hand. "Mr. Stark, I'm a big fan of your work! If I hadn't become an attorney, I would have gone into engineering. Thanks for saving our asses."

"Attorney, huh? Well, you look young enough to wise up and get a real job soon," replied the goateed man from behind his metal mask. Loki said nothing, but noticed that he was being scrutinized by Thor. Looking him square in the eye, Loki gave the God of Thunder a nod and kept on walking; he did not trust himself to speak, lest he say something to betray himself. He was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he heard a familiar, booming voice call out. "Just one moment."

"Damn! How could they possibly..." Loki was turning back toward the door when Thor walked up to him, holding out a bright blue piece of plastic and saying, "If you will hold out your wrist, this is
to allow you through the security lines. You have already been scanned, so there is no need for you to wait in line."

Loki couldn't believe it. Oh, this was too good of an opportunity to pass up. Loki grinned at Thor as he held out his right arm, "So, saving the world one day and working as a low-level security guard the next? I certainly hope that they are paying you." Thor eyed the man, trying to size him up and formulate a response.

"Is there something wrong?" Loki drawled out in Jack's voice.

Thor shook his head as if to clear his mind. "I'm sorry. You just reminded me of someone." Thor finished attaching the wristband to Loki's wrist, then turned around and strode to his original position by the glass doors. Chester sidled up to Loki, "Jeez, Jack. You're head must be up in the clouds. I yelled for you to stop."

Loki managed to fake a sheepish grin at Chester. "I'm anxious to get home. Can't you tell?" With that, both men bypassed the security lines and went to their gate. Mercifully, the flight was on schedule. Loki sent his obligatory text message to Lauren (not wanting to upset the woman further). *I'm at the airport. Waiting at the gate. Within seconds, Loki got a response: Great! We can't wait to see you!*

He didn't draw an easy breath until he was on the plane and it was in the air. The entire airport terminal had been crawling with SHIELD agents and with other uniformed personnel that Loki identified as some branch of the military and local law enforcement. This was in addition to the run-of-the-mill airport security. The attacks and his being at-large had everyone on edge. Still, the devastation of the city was such that people who were not residents had been advised to leave as soon as possible. Nobody had to tell Loki twice.

Hours later, Loki felt the plane begin its descent. He looked out the window to see that they were flying over rugged mountains, capped with snow, and vast stands of evergreen trees that where dotted with towns. One especially large mountain, covered in glaciers at the top, stood out amongst the rest. Beyond that, Loki could see a city along the edge of the water. He assumed that was Seattle. As soon as the plane was at the gate, Loki was out of his seat.

"Whoa! Slow down there, Jack. They have to open the doors first," Chester laughed at him. "I know you want to get home to Lauren, but take it easy."

Reluctantly, Loki returned to his seat and waited. It wasn't so much the wanting to get home part, as it was wanting to get off of this flying capsule. He did not realize how intolerable the conditions aboard really were until about an hour into the flight. Even with his dulled senses, Loki could smell how stale the air had become. He was surprised that humans weren't dying in droves at being over-exposed to a panoply of germs, either their own or those brought on board by fellow passengers. He worried that if he stayed much longer, he would contract some disease and die in this form.

As soon as he could, without drawing further attention to himself, Loki exited the aircraft and made his way to the baggage claim. Chester struggled to keep up with his long strides; the younger man had to practically run. "Hey! Slow down! You're dropping me off at home, remember?"

The two men claimed their bags, then started walking to the parking structure. Loki subtly followed Chester, since he clearly remembered where Jack had parked his car. Digging around in his coat pocket, Loki removed the keyring. He remembered seeing Barton use the buttons on the fob to lock and unlock the doors of the car in Stuttgart. When it did, it made a short, chirping noise. He began to press the buttons he found on this one. He nearly jumped out of his skin when
he heard a horn blaring and saw headlights flashing. Chester laughed until tears came from his eyes. "First day with your car, Jack? You hit the panic button!"

Loki hurriedly pressed all the buttons again until the car quit making that miserable racket. Judging by the look of the car, Jack Collins' taste would suit Loki just fine. The vehicle was a sleek, black sedan with leather interior and wood panel finishes, polished to a high gloss. Loki pressed a few more buttons until he got the vehicle to unlock. He was about to get into the vehicle when Chester called out, "Hey, man! Pop the trunk!" Loki saw a button on the fob with a picture of some hatch opening on a car; pressing it yielded the desired result.

Now, came the real challenge: piloting this vehicle. While in possession of the scepter, Loki had Barton or any number of his minions do the driving for him. He had watched them operate the vehicles. It seemed easy enough; Loki had even picked up on a few rules of the road, regarding how lanes and traffic signals worked. Surely, the trip between the airport and this man's home would not be difficult.

~Forty Minutes Later~

Loki exited the freeway, cutting across three lanes of traffic and not slowing down. Chester screamed in terror as the concrete retaining wall on the right side of the off-ramp rushed to meet passenger side of the car. The impact didn't come, as the driver of the vehicle corrected its course. The speed at which the vehicle travelled was still far too fast for the off-ramp; Loki barely negotiated the turn as he drifted around the corner. The speed at which the vehicle travelled was still far too fast for the off-ramp; Loki barely negotiated the turn as he drifted around the corner. He left the blare of angry car horns, shouting drivers, and flying fingers in his wake has he continue to drive at a break-neck pace. As they neared the residential area of Bellevue that Chester called home, the traumatized man found is voice. "Hey, boss? That 25 mile-per-hour speed limit isn't a suggestion. I've been pulled over for doing 30, and you're, oh, doing 45 right now."

Loki let his foot of the accelerator and downshifted to slow the car's rate of travel. To fly down the freeway between the airport and here had been exhilarating! The engine of the car had roared to life in the parking structure, much like large cat that was its namesake. Thor may have been the one with the ability to fly, but Loki loved speed and was the superior pilot of the two. Technically Mjolnir was the one that flew; Thor was just a lazy hanger-on. After having tested the limits of the vehicle, Loki looked forward to continuing with this mode of travel. Looking over at Chester, he grinned. "What is wrong, Chester? Don't tell me that you're afraid of driving."

Chester's eyes looked as if they would fall out of his head. "Driving? DRIVING? Is that what you call that back there!??! Jack, I thought you had a death wish and were planning to take me with you! Tell Lauren you're not allowed to play Grand Theft Auto anymore. You're taking the whole 'drive it like you stole it' thing to an unhealthy level."

Loki laughed so heartily at this that he almost missed Chester telling him that they had arrived at their location. He pulled up to the curb and opened the trunk for Chester to retrieve his luggage. He noted that the underarms of the man's shirt were soaked with sweat and his skin appeared clammy. Perhaps Loki did push it a little too much with the car. Chester leaned in to the open car door and said, "I mean it! No more! Other than that, I'll see you on Tuesday."

Once the car door was shut, Loki pulled away from the curb. As soon as he was out of sight of Chester's townhouse, he pulled over again to look for Jack's drivers license. He entered the address on the license into the navigation screen on the dashboard. Following the directions, Loki was able to find his way back to the freeway and head toward what was to be his new home...at least for the short-term.
The edges of the city gave way to evergreen forest as Loki cruised down the highway. Following the directions from the car's navigation system, he noted that his final destination was just on the outskirts of town. The town of Redmond seemed to be populated by the moderately affluent and the less ostentatious. It was certainly less populated and less flashy than what he had seen of Bellevue when he dropped Chester off at his home. Loki's heart sank a bit at the prospect of having to while away his time in out in the sticks. That feeling was quickly laid to rest when Loki saw the stately homes set back from the road. When the vehicle chime indicated that he was to turn into the driveway on his left, Loki cast an appreciative eye on the large two-story home with a slate gray roof, stone and light gray wooden exterior with green trim. Large windows flanked either side of the muted red front door. A front porch ran the width of the house, overlooking a well-kept and beautifully landscaped yard that complimented, rather than competed, with the surrounding woods.

Loki pulled the vehicle into the driveway, stopping in front of the garage doors. Opening the trunk and removing his luggage, he took a deep breath. "How hard can this be? They are the man's wife and children. They will be excited to see him and won't suspect anything. I just need to match their enthusiasm to be convincing." He had just reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the end of the porch when he heard the sound of the front door opening and small running feet. "Daddy, you're finally home!" shouted the boy. He ran down the stairs, jumping off the second to the last step before running at Loki's legs full-steam ahead. The boy wrapped his arms around Loki's waist as far as he could reach, peering up at him with eyes filled with what could be best described as hero worship.

"Daddy! Daddy! Catch me!" the little girl lisped as she jumped off the top step. In a panicked moment Loki stepped forward, taking the boy with him. Not trusting this human form to catch the child, he braced himself for the possibility that he would fly backward upon impact. To his surprise, he did not drop her or fall backward; the little girl squealed with delight at landing in his arms. She threw her tiny arms around his neck and kissed him. There was no amount of mental pep-talks or snooping on the dead man's computer that could have prepared Loki for this. He had never seen himself as a paternal figure to anyone, let alone having offspring of his own. After being "raised" by Odin, Loki was quite sure that he would not want children, lest he ruin them in the way that the All-Father's exemplary parenting had ruined his own upbringing.

The sheer joy that these little ones exuded at seeing the man they thought was their father was almost too much for Loki. They were not even his own, but to feel unconditionally loved was enough to threaten tears and awaken feelings that he had believed to be burned out of him long ago. Loki blinked rapidly as he reminded himself that the children were showing this love for the late Jack Collins, not for Loki Laufeyson, former King of Asgard and current king of nowhere. He had been so busy marveling at the tiny faces beaming at him, that he had forgotten to speak. He wasn't reminded of that until he heard a lilting drawl from the porch tease him, "Well, don't just stare at your minions, Mr. Collins. Say 'hello.' They've been anxious to see you since they woke up this morning."

Loki raised his eyes to the vision he saw leaning against the column with her arms folded over her ample chest. The mid-afternoon sun was captured in her hair, a few unruly wisps coming lose from her ponytail and framing her face. It was nothing compared to the glow of her eyes and smile, set against luminescent skin. Loki's worst fears had been realized: Lauren was even more breathtaking in person and his ability to withstand temptation would be pushed to its limits. He shoved those thoughts aside.
He had to think back to some of the kinder things that Odin had ever said to him and Thor, well mostly to Thor, to formulate a proper response to the children still clinging to him. Finally finding his voice, Loki looked down at Rylan and Olivia, "I'm happy to be home with you both. Have you been good for your mother?"

"Yes, we have," Olivia said as she squirmed in his arms. "We helped Mommy bake yesterday."

"You did? What did you bake?"

"Your favorite, Daddy," Rylan piped up. "Chocolate chip cookies with walnuts."

Loki had only an inkling of what the boy was talking about, but he did his best to show enthusiasm for this baked good that had elicited so much excitement from the children. "Well, if you and Mommy baked them, I'm sure that they will be delicious." He made his way up the stairs, pulling his suitcase with one hand and carrying Olivia in his other arm. He set Olivia on her feet once he was on the porch. Standing within arm's reach of Lauren, Loki felt a lump in his throat. He chided himself for it. "This is absurd! You, who have bedded scores of women...many of them married, I might add...across multiple realms, are as nervous as a virginal teenager with this woman. Why?"

Of course, he knew the reason. Or rather, reasons.

For starters, he had taken an enormous risk impersonating this woman's husband. Of course, with great risk comes great reward. That he literally passed under the nose of his brother and Tony Stark was a huge boon for him. Now, he risked discovery if this woman or her children suspected that something was amiss.

Then, of course, there was the increasing isolation and lack of intimacy that Loki had endured in recent years. At first, it was not an issue. Loki had contented himself with the occasional dalliance to satisfy himself physically, not expecting anything more than a warm body to periodically warm his bed. He knew as the younger prince that he was a bargaining chip for both the All-Father and for any number of ambitious royals and courtiers. Emotionally, he always kept his paramours at arm's length. He had no idea how to behave otherwise.

He time in the custody of the Mad Titan had not helped any. Not that Loki desired anything from the creatures that dwelled at the feet of Thanos. They were wretched beings, twisted and malformed physically and mentally, bent to the will of their master to serve as instruments of destruction. It was only through sheer will that Loki had not completely lost himself among their ranks. As a result, he was more determined than ever to maintain his identity and not be just another pawn in someone else's game.

The children ran ahead of him into the house. Lauren slipped her arms around Loki's waist, resting her cheek against his chest and startling him from his darker thoughts. "Thank God that you're home, safe and sound," she sighed contentedly.

Taking his cue from Lauren, Loki wrapped his arms around her saying, "I am sorry to have made you worry, Lauren, but yes. I am grateful to be home now."

She lifted her head from his chest and peered up at him with a glint in her eye and a smile on her lips as she replied, "You can show me how grateful you are later." Her words stunned Loki as she giggled and placed a quick kiss on his lips. Lauren went to pull away from him, but Loki grabbed the back of her head and returned her kiss with an urgency that surprised her. The woman's body became pliant as Loki deepen his kiss; the soft whimper that left her made Loki break away.

Lauren, on the other hand, was flush with excitement and look a bit disappointed at how abruptly their kiss had ended. She bit her lower lip, then breathily whispered, "If that's what I can expect
later, the kids will be going to bed early tonight."

Loki had no idea what came over him, but he had been swept up in the wave of sensations that relatively chaste show of affections had caused. It was euphoric. As he watched the woman walk back into the house, Loki resolved that wasn't going to happen again. He took up his suitcase and followed Lauren into the house.

Upon entering the house, Loki tried not to give the impression that this was his first time here. He noted that the two front rooms of the home were more formal. A sitting room sat to the left, through a large set of glass pocket doors; to the right, was a formal dining room. There was a set of stairs leading up to the floor above and a hallway leading to the rest of the ground floor. Loki could hear the sounds of the children playing somewhere down the hallway. Lauren was leading him up the stairs, where he assumed the bedrooms were located. They passed what were obviously the children's bedrooms, and an empty bedroom that was evidently a guest room. There was also a room occupied by a desk, built-in book shelves and a slightly worn couch by the window. At the end of the hallway, located above the garage, was the master suite.

Loki was struck by what could best be described as cozy luxury; it was evidently Lauren's handiwork. Like the rest of the house, it was an eclectic mix of old-and-worn with new-and-shiny. There were his and her's walk-in closets, a detail that he would have missed if Lauren hadn't opened the door to his closet as he started unpacking the suitcase. "I will take in your dry cleaning on Monday," she called from inside the bathroom. "You have fresh suits and shirts that I picked up Thursday. I also picked up your brown Bruno's from the shoe repair place."

"Thank you, Lauren," Loki replied. She bustled about the room, laying out more informal clothing for him. "Here. I figured that you'd want to change and get comfy since we're staying in tonight." She had put out a pair of jeans and a Duke basketball t-shirt.

As he removed the button down shirt and slacks he had been wearing, Loki felt the woman's eyes on him. She was still flitting about, putting away some of Jack's items and sorting the rest into their respective laundry piles, stealing furtive glances at him all the while. Before Loki could say anything to her, she hefted one basket onto her hip to carry it downstairs. Leaving him alone in the master suite, Loki continued to explore. There was a small sitting area with matching arm chairs and an ottoman by a large bay window. The master bathroom was outfitted with dual sinks, a large shower, and a soaking tub. From the window over the tub, Loki could see the children outside playing fetch with the dog, who he learned was named Rocky. Having stowed the suitcase away in the closet, Loki wandered back downstairs.

Lauren was now seated on the deck with a pitcher of some sort of beverage and a plate of what Loki assumed were the cookies that the children had helped bake. Looking up from the book that she was reading, Lauren smiled at her husband. "The weather has been so nice here. Let's hope that it's as nice on our trip in a few weeks. Lemonade?"

Loki nodded in agreement as Lauren poured him a glass. "I certainly hope so, too," he bluffed. "Where are we going again?"

A sour expression graced Lauren's features as she handed him the glass. "John Collins, you know damn well where we are going! We put off the trip to see my folks twice in the last year. If you try to finagle out of it again, I'll go without you and may not come back."

He quickly grasped the woman's hand, and smiled as he placed a kiss on the back of it and continued his bluff, "I know, sweetheart. I was only trying to get a rise out of you. I'm sorry."

Unbeknownst to him, Loki had managed to hit a sore spot with the woman. While her expression
softened a bit, she was still irritated with him. "Honestly, Jack. We haven't been to see them in three years. They've come here, but it's not the same. They're getting on in years; it's not so easy for them to travel. Daddy and Momma are so looking forward to us being there, especially with Candace and Scott due to have their baby any day now."

"By the Norns' teeth! Now I have to deal with her family, too! Maybe I should consider faking my death sooner," Loki thought. He must've made his displeasure plain, because Lauren reached out and touched his hand in a conciliatory manner. "Listen, I don't want to pick up where we left off before you left for New York. I know that you and Daddy don't always see eye-to-eye, but please try. For me and kids? Please?"

The pleading in her voice and her eyes made Loki feel uncomfortable and desperate to change the subject. He patted her hand with his free one and replied, "Of course, Lauren, I will do my best."

Satisfied with his answer, Lauren reclined in her chair and picked up her book to resume reading. By turns, Loki watched her and the children. He had gleaned from Agent Barton's mind what it was like to have what was known as the "white picket fence" dream. While Barton's version involved a farm (something that Loki thought looked like a lot more work than fun), he assumed that this was probably Jack Collins' version of that same ideal. Soon, the children came bounding up the stairs of the deck to where their mother sat. Seeing the plate of cookies and the lemonade, they began to ask for some.

"Alright, I will get you cups for lemonade. Make sure to share the cookies with Daddy, okay?" Lauren rose from her seat as the little hands reached for the plate. Olivia came to stand in front of Loki, gazing at him with her big bright eyes. She scrambled up his leg and into his lap before she reached for the plate of cookies.

Loki chuckled, "Well, aren't you just a like a monkey?" The little girl grinned at him, then started to mimic the noises and body language of a monkey, pretending to scratch under her arm. Melted chocolate at the corners of her mouth added to the effect and made Loki laugh outright. Rylan, seeing that his sister got their father to laugh with her antics, joined in by pretending to walk on his knuckles and making soft hoots and grunts like a gorilla. The children being silly (and surprisingly good impressionists) made him laugh even more. "Creatures after my own heart! Things may not be so bad here, after all," Loki thought as he took one of the cookies for himself. Between the children and savoring the baked treats, Loki didn't notice Lauren come back outside until she was beside the table pouring the children their lemonade.

"Alright, little monkeys, here's your lemonade," Lauren said as she struggled to hide the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. The children, no longer behaving like monkeys, thanked their mother and went to sit on their little chairs next to a little table that was just for them. Turning to her "husband," Lauren smiled softly as she said, "You know, Jack, they constantly do things just to make you laugh. They miss you so much when you aren't here."

Her eyes were fill with warmth, marred only by a touch of sadness at the absences to which she was alluding. Loki remained silent. He did not know whether to respond with contrition or defensiveness to Lauren. While he suspected that Jack would have been defensive, Loki saw no reason to disagree with Lauren. The family's dog had risen from where he had been laying in the sun. Walking over to where he and Lauren sat, the dog eyed Loki as he sniffed the air. Rocky approached with his head lowered and tail between his legs. Lauren said with astonishment, "Rocky, it's Jack! You know who he is, silly boy."

Loki had not counted on the presence of the animal; however, it was an easily remedied problem. Loki allowed the dog to creep closer, slowly extending his hand toward the dog so that he could
sniff it and know that he was not a threat. With his head still lowered and ears laid back, Rocky cautiously sniffed at the proffered hand. When Loki pet the dog, Rocky's tail began to wag. Soon, the dog was a bursting with energy and began to run and yip like a puppy, bring Loki his various toys that were scattered across the yard. Lauren, who had been watching the scene unfold, looked from the dog to Loki. "That was strange," Lauren said. "You've taken longer trips before, and Rocky has never reacted that way."

"Perhaps I still smell of the stress I went through while in New York," Loki offered. He knew that it was a weak explanation at best, but hoped that Lauren would not pry into it.

She smiled as she said, "Oh well. He's back to his old self now. Trying to get you to play with him." Jack had a strange look on his face, one that Lauren did not immediately recognize as part of his repertoire. Her husband's range of emotion was not particularly variable, so Lauren usually had an easy time of deciphering his thoughts. In that moment, though, the man sitting across from her looked like her husband, except he was studying her. It made her nervous.

"What are you looking at, Jack?"

He continued to look at her, little in his gaze shifting as he replied, "I'm looking at you, Lauren. Can't a man look at his wife?"

This was not like Jack at all. He would usually reply with "Nothing," then go on to change the subject to something mundane rather than address the elephant in the room. Jack's answer seemed even stranger since he seemed to hardly give her more than a glance these days. He always blamed fatigue from work for his peevish behavior, but Lauren suspected that there was more to it. Under normal circumstances, Jack's mind appeared to be elsewhere when he was at home: as if he would rather be anywhere but here. This version of Jack, however, was not only present but seemed to be looking at everything as if it was his first time here with his wife and children. Perhaps being caught in the middle of the battle had made Jack reflect on some things and take stock of his life. As much as he complained (Jack was always a pessimist), Lauren took it upon herself to remind him just how good he really had it. Lauren brushed her thoughts aside, since she had to go get dinner started. The man seated on the patio, playing with the kids and the dog was obviously her husband. Who else could it be?
"Daddy! Push me higher!" Olivia shouted as Loki pushed both of the children on the swing set in the backyard. Thankfully, Rylan only required the occasional push since he knew how to use his legs to maintain the momentum of the swing. Loki's mortal form was beginning to tire from playing with the children, but he didn't want to stop. They had already spent an hour jumping on the trampoline, much to the delight of the children who were bounced higher into the air with Jack's body also bouncing on the tightly-stretched canvas. While he and the children were on the trampoline, Lauren had called out to him a few times to "take it easy." Her worrying reminded him of Frigga's concern over rough-and-tumble play in which he was engaged as a child. More specifically, how rough Thor and his friends had been.

The sun was starting to set, when Loki heard Lauren's voice calling from the house. "Jack, would you please bring the kids inside so they can wash before supper?"

"Come along, children. Your mother says it's time to go inside," Loki said as he grabbed Olivia's swing to slow her down. Rylan, still seated on his swing, turned a hopeful face upward.

"Please, Daddy? Can't we play for a little while longer?" Loki looked down at the boy, who's eyes were opened a little wider than usual. He knew the game that the boy was playing; it was one at which he excelled.

"That look won't work on me, young man. I invented that look!" Loki answered the boy's pleas in a mock-serious tone that still left no room for argument.

The boy reluctantly stood up from his swing and took his father's hand. As they walked back up to the house, Rylan kicked a rock with the toe of his sneaker and said, "Ah well. It was worth a shot."

Loki laughed at the boy's unexpected rejoinder. Hearing his father's laugh and taking it as approval, Rylan grinned up at him. Olivia, who was holding on to Loki's other hand, skipped along side him and hopped up the stairs once they reached the deck. Still chuckling at what the boy had said, Loki shook his head as he made his way over to the kitchen sink to wash his hands while the children used the sink in the mudroom. Lauren took in her husband's appearance; the worried brow and tense jaw to which she had grown accustomed were missing. He had clearly been perspiring from exertion and looked a little worn out. In fact, Lauren couldn't recall the last time that he had just played with the kids in the yard.

As she passed him with a bowl of steamed vegetables in her hands, she reached up on the tips of her toes to give him a lingering kiss on the cheek. "It looks like the kids tried to wear you out, Jack. I hope that you aren't too tired," she whispered.

Jack's head snapped to the side as he looked down at his wife with the same strangely surprised
expression that he wore when he came home. Lauren just smiled and winked at him as she continued on her way to the table she had set for dinner. Loki watched the gentle sway of the woman's hips as she walked away from him; he swallowed hard at the lump that had risen in his throat. He had been pleasantly distracted by the children for the last few hours. So much so that he had forgotten to come up with an acceptable excuse to ward off the attentions of Jack's wife. By his reckoning, he still had a few hours to come up with something. He had to think fast.

He made his way over to the table, where Lauren was getting the children situated with their meals. A beef roast and mashed potatoes were already on the table; rolls had just been pulled from the oven. Before serving herself, Lauren carved pieces of meat and cut it into smaller pieces for the children. She began to scoop potatoes on to each child's plate, when Rylan asked if he could have more potatoes.

Lauren gave her son a gently stern look as she replied, "Rylan, you need to save room for your vegetables."

"Aw, Momma! Do I have to?"

The woman looked across the table at her husband, "Jack? A little help?"

This one, Loki could handle. "Do as your mother says, son."

Dejected at not getting his way, Rylan muttered to himself, "When I'm a grown-up, I'm gonna eat what I want. No vegetables at all!"

Loki fought to hide the smile on Jack's face. Rylan's comments echoed ones that Loki had made at a similar age, though not pertaining to food. "Oh, Mother! When I grow up, I won't need to train at all with Thor! I will spend my time practicing magic and reading!" The sound of Lauren clearing her throat and the children giggling broke Loki from his reverie. She had apparently been asking him to pass the vegetables to her. Lauren turned to the children with a hint of laughter in her voice, "Daddy must have been sleeping with his eyes open."

Olivia giggled as she took a bite of her dinner, "People can't sleep with their eyes open, Mommy."

"Maybe Daddy's a zombie," replied Rylan. "He's starting to turn. He's gonna eat your brains, Livie!"

The little girl squealed at this, but her squeals turned to giggles when her dad turn to her brother and said, "If I'm turning into a zombie, Rylan, I'm going to eat your brains first."

Lauren looked at Jack with amusement in her eyes, even as she mildly admonished him for "getting the kids wound up at the dinner table." She took her seat across the table from him and began to ask him about his plans for the week. For this, Loki was prepared. He had studied Jack's calendar and email correspondence and was able to instantly recall the details of both. Her attentiveness and prior knowledge of her husband's work came as a pleasant surprise to Loki. After all, he was used to others (with the exception of his mother) ignoring his efforts. It further cemented Loki's opinion that Jack Collins had been a very fortunate man. As dinner was winding down, Lauren began to clear dishes away. "Don't be surprised if you have to re-arrange your schedule on Thursday to speak with my boss and Tony Stark."

The look on Jack's face must have betrayed his surprise and disgust at hearing the name belonging to Iron Man. "Oh come on, Jack. You can't be surprised, since your firm is handling their patent infringement suit against Hammer Industries. I know that you and Tony got off on the wrong foot at my company's Christmas party, but he was three sheets to the wind. He's my boss's boss, so
He rose from the table to help clear the dishes, a move that obviously stunned the woman. Was this the wrong move? Was it out of character for her husband? He assumed that on Midgard, with no domestic servants in the house, that he was doing the right thing. The look on Lauren's face, though, seemed to indicate the opposite. "Is there something wrong?" Loki drawled out cautiously.

Lauren blinked twice before giving her head a slight shake. "No, everything's fine," she said with a smile. "Thank you for helping bring dishes in here." She began to put food away and load the dishwasher; Loki stood there, debating with himself. Should he remain to help her? Should he go see what the children are doing? Should he retire to Jack's home office? The decision was made for him when he heard the children scampering into the kitchen, taking him by the hand and tugging.

"Come on, Daddy. Come draw with us," Rylan insisted as he pulled at his father's hand. Loki looked up at Lauren, who was smiling at him and the children.

"Well, you heard him, Daddy. Go draw with the kids. I can handle the rest of the dishes," Lauren said as she fondly watched her husband and son leave the room to follow her daughter.

Olivia was running from the kitchen to the family room and knelt at her spot at the large table in front of the couches. They had already been drawing, it seemed, but they had place some blank sheets of paper in front where Rylan was guiding him to sit. As Loki took his seat on the couch, Rylan took a seat next to him. Before he started drawing, Loki looked at what the children had already done. Olivia was apparently drawing a pink horse with purple clouds; Rylan was drawing a sailboat and working on adding people to the deck of the boat.

The children were using sticks of colored wax, which Loki found to be amusingly odd. He was no stranger to drawing, but such a medium was foreign to him. Paints, he knew. With charcoal and ink, he excelled. These "crayons," as the children called them, were frustrating at first. He found that fine lines were quite out of the question; however, he could blend the colors if he used the correct amount of pressure while layering one over the other. He simply let his mind wander, not certain of what he was going to draw; his hand simply moved across the paper. Within minutes, the children had stopped working on their drawings and began watching him. Loki did not realize what he was drawing, until he suddenly heard the woman's bewildered voice behind him. "My goodness, Jack! I didn't know that you were such an artist! Who is that supposed to be?"

When Loki looked down at the drawing, he found that he had just drawn a portrait of Frigga. Not as he had last seen her, with concern and fear in her eyes, but of her on the day that would have been Thor's coronation. He had escorted her to the head of the throne room, ahead of Thor's arrival. She had been positively radiant that day. Then again, she always was. Looking up at Lauren, he replied, "It's from a portrait that I saw while in New York."

"Wow! I didn't know you could draw like that. If that's what it looks like in crayon, I can't wait to see the original."

With a rueful smile, Loki replied with Jack's voice. "Unfortunately, I don't think you can see the original anymore."

"Oh," replied Lauren softly. "Was it destroyed in the attack?"

"In a manner of speaking," Loki fought the desire to scream at the top of his lungs in frustration over the whole damn mess he had made things. It wouldn't do for him to frighten this poor family, especially as he was in the midst of regrouping and plotting his next moves. Still, so much more
than the battle had been lost. He knew now that he would not return to Asgard as a free man if he did not return triumphant—or as its conqueror.

Loki retreated from his darker thoughts. He would return to them when he was able to find some privacy. Fixing a smile on Jack's face, he turned to the children. "Now, what have you two been drawing?"

The children excitedly chattered as they continued drawing, asking their father questions about his trip and wanting to know if please, pretty please, could they go with him next time. Loki looked to Lauren when Rylan asked about the flying aliens. She subtly shook her head, which he took to mean that he shouldn't describe anything too much. He gave his son a very short account of what happened, with little to no detail. When it sounded like he was veering into too much detail, Lauren would quietly clear her throat, preempting whatever version of the story might be too gruesome for the children's ears. She then recommended that the kids pick out a story to read before putting on their nightclothes and brushing their teeth. "Who do you want to read to you tonight? Mommy or Daddy?"

"Daddy!" cried the children in unison.

Lauren turned to face Jack with a playful pout, "Of course they want you to read. When Daddy's home, he's the fun one."

The man chuckled at this, "I promise to do a terrible job so they will have you read next time."

In spite of her husband's promise to "do a terrible job," the children were immersed in the story because Jack read the story with enthusiasm. He even did voices for the characters (since when?), keeping them enthralled. Still, Lauren began to see the telltale signs of bedtime. First Olivia, then Rylan, began to yawn and let their eyelids get heavy. They were seated on either side of their father, cuddled against him. Olivia fell asleep before hearing whether or not the Beast had turned back into a handsome prince. Rylan stayed awake to the end of the story, but he was fading fast. The boy rubbed his eyes and sat up groggily as his mother beckoned him up the stairs.

Loki gently reached to his left and lifted Olivia from her spot on the couch, cradling her head against the crook of his neck. He carried her up the stairs; Lauren and Rylan walking ahead of him. The woman switched on a light in the room across from his office, its low light revealing the girl's room, as she followed the boy into his room. Loki pulled the covers back on the little bed and went to lower the girl onto it. Her arms went around his neck. "Not time for bed yet," he heard her whimper.

"I am sorry little one, but it is," he said while gently prying her arms from around his neck. Olivia's little face tensed up with a frown as her head hit the pillow. The frown melted away when Loki pulled the covers over her and stroked her hair away from her face. Assured that she would not awaken, Loki stood and left the room. Before he could turn off the little light on top of the dresser, he heard Lauren's voice from down the hall say, "Please leave that on. She's been having nightmares and is scared of the dark."

Jack's brow furrowed at this as he looked back into the room. Loki would have to see what he could do about that. He then heard Lauren's voice again. "Rylan is waiting for you to say 'good night.'"

Loki turned from the girl's room and walked down the hall to the boy's room. The lamp beside his bed was still on; Rylan could barely keep his eyes open. Loki sat on the edge of the boy's bed and brushed the hair back from Rylan's eyes. "Good night, Rylan."
The boy sat up and threw his arms around his father's neck. "Good night, Daddy. I love you."

Unbidden, the response escaped his lips, "I love you too, son."

Loki took leaden steps down the remaining distance of hallway from Rylan's room to the master suite. He hope against hope that the woman had fallen asleep already. To have it be otherwise, the temptation would be far too great.

On its face, the situation was ridiculous. He had no problem deceiving others to meet his own ends. After all, it was in his very title! However, even the God of Lies could only go so far. Right? It was one thing to seduce a woman stretching the truth and sprinkling in a few white lies here and there. What this entailed, though, was on a dizzying scale. On the other hand, Loki rationalized, he wasn't stealing the man's wife because she was technically a widow. A widow because of his ill-fated invasion of Earth. Damn. Even while trying to salve his conscience, he managed to make himself feel even more guilty. As it turned out, guilt was an effective dampener for any sort of romantic inclinations. Taking a deep breath, convinced that he was able to rise above temptation, Loki entered the room.

"I really hope that you aren't too tired, honey. I have missed you and plan to show you just how much."

Shutting the door behind him, Loki turned at the sound of Lauren's voice. He did not know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't the sight that greeted his eyes. He could feel his resolve evaporate immediately. If he thought it would help, he would have prayed to the Norns. But even Loki knew that there were some things that could not be helped.
I am sorely tempted to post the other version that I had written for this chapter. All roads lead to Rome. Eventually...

By the way, the following is 99% smut. No, I'm not the least bit sorry. :-p

Lauren watched her husband quietly enter their bedroom, as if he anticipated that she was already in bed asleep. His footfalls were silent; the door shut with a barely audible click. She had purposefully left the small lamp on his side of the bed on its lowest setting, hoping that the soft light would be more flattering than the harsh, overhead lights or even the full light from either of the lamps next to the bed. It was silly, she knew. She spent so much time agonizing over laugh wrinkles and fine lines that started to become more prominent, or the stray, silverly grays that had begun to crop up in her otherwise auburn hair, or the fact that gravity and breastfeeding had not been kind and her once perky breasts now needed all the support that the fine people at Wacoal and Victoria's Secret could provide. Not to mention, after two pregnancies within two years of each other, who wouldn't have stretch marks? Super women and winners in the genetics lottery, that's who.

She had convinced herself that her aging and the stress of having two little kids had driven a wedge between her and Jack. She couldn't do anything about aging and her children made all the stress and worry worth every wrinkle, gray hair, and stretch mark she had. Still, she wanted to fix what was broken between her and her husband. Worse than the angry words or the lack of physical intimacy were the sullen silences and long absences from home and from their life, in general. Lauren had thought that after their last argument, right before he had left for New York, that it was the beginning of the end. She had spent hours on the phone with her mother and sister, lamenting the state of her marriage and believing that things were beyond repair. And yet...here he was, staring at her. If such a thing was possible, he simultaneously seemed like the man she had married eight years prior and someone she had never met. He said nothing, his eyes unreadable to Lauren as he continued to stare and not say a word. In the years she was married to Jack, she learned that he was prone to gushing with praise when pleased and that silence meant disapproval.

"Too much?" she asked. "It's too much, I know. It looked better when I tried it on, but now I feel silly." Lauren took a step toward the dresser to pull out her usual tank top and shorts. She would not allow her eyes to meet his so he would not see the hurt and disappointment. That's why, when she felt a pair of strong hands grip her shoulders and spin her around, she felt a knot of anxiety in her stomach. Before she could even cry out in surprise, Jack's lips were clamped over hers. They felt cooler than normal, but Lauren was too lost in the moment to even wonder why.

Even without seeing her with his own eyes, Loki knew that the woman was strikingly gorgeous. Seeing her now, wearing a short satin nightgown in a shade of forest green that was reflected in her eyes, Loki cursed the fact that he was in a mortal form. She had seemed so confident when he first turned around, dumbstruck at the sight of her. Her skin was generously exposed to this mortal form's eyes: her shapely shoulders and legs, the tender skin of her neck and shoulders, the tops of her breasts. She was certainly no delicate figurine; Loki noted the slight definition of her arms and
back, which gave way to the soft curves of her breasts and hips. His mind immediately went to all of the things he longed to do, that he could do if only he were himself. His eyes ravished her, but Loki was shaken from his reverie by the sound of her voice, "Too much? It's too much, I know."

It had felt like hours to him since he had laid eyes on her, but Lauren was now second-guessing her decision to greet him thusly. Gone was the fiery goddess he had seen upon entering the room, replaced with a delicate rose that was wilting before his eyes. "Oh no, Lauren," Loki thought, "You've nowhere to hide. Neither do I."

She had her back to him as she rummaged in the chest of drawers. In the time it took for Loki to stride across the room, he shifted into his preferred form and cast a spell on the room to ensure that Lauren still saw Jack in his place. An illusion would not do, as it would vanish on contact...and Loki planned for there to be a lot of that. It didn't take much of his strength to cast such a spell. To do so everywhere he went, however, would have drained Loki completely in a matter of minutes. No, he would continue to go about in a mortal form everywhere but this room. Here, he would be able to see and touch Lauren as himself, and she would be none the wiser.

He now saw her with his own eyes, confirming what he already knew to be true. Her hair had a sheen like polished bronze that was imperceptible to mortal eyes. Her skin glowed against her loose hair and the dark satin of the nightgown, even in the dimly lit room. Lauren's eyes, though, were the most striking of all: the softly muted green-blue seen by mortal eyes was almost turquoise to Loki's vision. Standing right behind her, Loki could feel and smell her warmth...and unfulfilled arousal. Careful to not grab her too roughly (he did not yet know the limits of her strength), he took her by the shoulders and devoured her lips before she could say another word. For all of his cleverness, his words deserted him. His only option was to show her the depths of his need in that moment.

Lauren began to swoon as Jack crushed her against his body. He kissed her with such strength and urgency that she could almost feel bruises starting to form. She needed air. She needed take things slower. She needed to never stop.

When her arms encircled his neck, she ran her fingers through Jack's hair. It was thick and slightly wavy, but not as coarse as she remembered. Even his skin seemed a bit smoother and cooler than she remembered. Had it really been so long since she had been with her husband like this? Had she really forgotten what he felt like? She certainly didn't remember him kissing like this!

Jack ran his hands down her back to cup her ass and lift her up. Reflexively, Lauren's legs wrapped around his waist. She had already been turned on before Jack started kissing her, now she was embarrassingly so. Feeling muscular abs underneath the fabric of his shirt, she sought some relief for herself by slowly grinding against him. She wasn't wearing any panties; this was not missed by Jack, who's chuckle was somehow deeper than usual. She felt Jack's lips brush against her neck as he whispered, "If you had been wearing panties, Lauren, they would be drenched already."

Lauren blushed at this. Jack never talked dirty, so for him to call her out like that made her uncomfortable. Without warning, Jack grabbed her by the chin and turned her head so that she looked him in eye. "You're embarrassed. Don't be," Jack's voice was tender, but firm. "I will never get enough of seeing you this way. I plan to see you like this often," his hands drifted up the inside of her thigh with his fingertips ghosting over her mound and making her moan, "warm, wet, and waiting for me."

Jack's words had an even greater effect than his touch; his fingers would drift down her thigh, then lazily beneath the hem of the nightgown back to her core and stopping just shy of her folds. Lauren's thighs quivered in anticipation each time, and each time Jack's fingers moved away she
would whimper. Jack grinned at her response. She wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light, but Jack's hazel eyes seem to take on a green tint as he slipped the nightgown over her head and tossed it to the side. He licked his bottom lip. A sound that was something between a sigh and a groan escaped Jack's lips, as his eyes roved over her body. She would have normally been uncomfortable under Jack's gaze, especially as it lingered on her breasts and hips. Her breath hitch in her throat as Lauren felt his fingertips glide between her breasts and down her stomach; she released a sharp gasp when one of his fingers slide up the inside of her folds. Lauren's hips thrust upward toward his hand, but Jack's finger had already retreated, trailing some of her slickness along the inside of her thigh.

"Please, Jack. I need more," Lauren's voice was trembling, as was the rest of her.

Jack's gaze was ravenous, but oddly indecisive. It was as if he was trying to figure out what he wanted to do with her first. Under normal circumstances, Jack would have already been inside her, come, and rolled over on his side to fall into a snoring sleep (whether Lauren was satisfied or not). Right now, he was acting as if it was the first time they had ever been together. Not even on their wedding night had Jack been this attentive. Not even on their wedding night had Jack been this attentive. Right now, he was acting as if it was the first time they had ever been together. Not even on their wedding night had Jack been this attentive. Not even on their wedding night had Jack been this attentive. Right now, he was acting as if it was the first time they had ever been together. Not even on their wedding night had Jack been this attentive.

Loki couldn't believe how responsive the woman was to him. He had worried that she would notice the slight tactile differences between her late husband and him. He knew that his Jotun heritage meant that even in his preferred Aesir form he had a slightly lower body temperature. More than one courtesan had complained of how cool his touch was on their skin. Prior to learning the terrible truth, Loki had always assumed it had something to do with his seidr.

At the moment, though, Lauren was completely caught up. She lay spread out on the bed before him. Loki's mind raced: how far could he take this? He knew what he wanted, but he was still struggling with it all. Would she suspect anything? Would he be able to escape if she did? Where would he go? Lauren's voice, tremulous as she begged and struggled to breathe, was his undoing. "Caution be damned," Loki thought as slid forward so that Lauren's thighs rested on his shoulders. He angled her hips so that she was completely exposed to him. Loki flattened his tongue against her, giving a languorous lick all the way until his tongue circled the sensitive bundle of nerves. The woman arched her back as she cried out.

Placing a hand on the inside of each thigh to keep her open before him, his thumbs stroking Lauren's soft skin as he continued to suck, lick, and flick at her clit and entrance with his tongue. Lauren's cries grew louder, and Loki felt one of her hands grip his hair as she thrust into his face. Loki could feel her pulse under his tongue. She was close. So very close. He slid one hand past the top of her thigh so that one finger, then two, invaded her. Lauren grabbed a pillow and covered her face with it as she screamed out her husband's name, clutching his hair with her free hand. Her fingernails grazed Loki's scalp as she came for him. He continued to lap at her with his tongue as she soaked his hand and chin, not stopping until he felt the last spasm leave her body.

Sweat glistened on Lauren's stomach and between her breasts, strands of her hair were plastered to her forehead and sides of her neck. Loki was already hard as a rock. The sight of Lauren in such a state made him ache even more. He wanted to bury himself in her warmth, seeking his own release. As much as he wanted it, though, he still had the niggling thought that she would know he was not her husband. Mind made up, Loki rose from the bed to wash his face. "Now, where do you think you're going?"
His eyebrows shot up in surprise as he turned to see Lauren, her pupils blown with lust, crook a finger at him in a come hither motion as she said, "We aren't done yet, honey."

Loki thought his mind had been made up, and that satisfying Lauren would be where it stopped for now. The rest of his body, though, had other plans. His eyes locked on Lauren's, he prowled back to the foot of the bed, removing his clothes as he did. If it had not been for the obviously Midgardian attire, Loki would have forgotten himself and disappeared his clothes. That would have been a mood killer. As he disrobed piece by piece, Loki could feel and smell Lauren's arousal grow even stronger. Her eyes widened as he removed Jack's undergarments. Loki barely contained a smirk, knowing that Lauren thought she was looking at Jack. Based on what Loki knew of Jack's features, he would have to start out carefully with her in his own form.

Lauren watched as her husband removed his clothes before crawling toward her on the bed. Jack was early middle age, but still had the same body that he had when they had married. It had long been a point of vanity for him to strut his stuff about the bedroom in nothing but his boxer-briefs. However, what he was doing now was less about him preening and more about him giving Lauren a strip tease. Her eyes never left him; she only closed her eyes as he kissed her deeply before settling between her thighs.

Her eyes snapped open as she felt the blunt tip of his erection slip between her folds and tease her already slick entrance. What she felt seemed larger than what she had seen. Jack held himself with one hand as he continued to slide against Lauren. She could feel herself getting wetter, yearning for him to be inside her. Her sighs became a surprise gasp as he kissed her deeply before settling between her thighs.

Lauren was lost in Jack's kiss and his fingers rolling one of her nipples between them when he eased himself into her. Lauren broke off the kiss and was panting heavily. Jack stayed still. "You feel so amazing, Lauren. Relax for me," he crooned as he brushed her hair away from her neck before gently kissing and sucking at her neck and collarbone. He kissed down to her breasts, teasing one with his tongue and the other with his fingers. The tension left Lauren's body as she moaned and slowly rolled her hips against him.

Jack groaned and responded by rocking his hips slowly. Lauren continued to adjust to Jack's size, until they were both thrusting against each other at a painfully slow pace. In spite of how wet she was, Lauren still felt the dull pain of Jack stretching her. The pressure continued to grow inside her belly, her walls clinching around his hardened length. Lauren heard Jack hiss as his thrusts became deeper. Her moans crescendoed into full-throated cries as she gripped Jack's ass, encouraging him to go faster. The tight coil in her belly sprang free as Lauren came hard, sobbing with relief. Jack came with her, shouting her name as he emptied himself in Lauren.

Jack's arms were shaking as he lowered himself to kiss Lauren. "Oh, my sweet darling," he murmured against her neck, "You cannot possibly know how badly I needed that."

He was still hard inside her, but Lauren was too dazed to question his new-found stamina or even respond to him. Instead, she could only stroke the muscles along his back as she came down from her high. The pressure that she applied to the areas just below his shoulder blades and his lower back earned her sounds of her husband's approval. He slowly withdrew from her, causing Lauren to moan slightly in protest. Laying on his side, Jack pulled Lauren into his arms and wrapped a leg around hers and pulled the covers over them. Placing a kiss on her forehead, he ran his fingers through her hair until she fell asleep.
The steady sound of the woman's breathing was the only sound in the room as Loki stared at the ceiling. While he was satiated, more so than he had been in recent memory, he was still troubled. He had been himself; for him, there would have been no other way for him to bed the woman. The thought of even trying to be Jack Collins was dissatisfying in the extreme. It was bad enough to have to pretend to be him to remain in hiding. Now, Loki had an even bigger problem on his hands. He had taken Lauren as himself, but she still thought it was her husband.

The deception was not the most troubling aspect of this situation. Loki was jealous in many things, chief among them was in his affections. The fact that she was calling out for "Jack," not Loki, made him burn with envy. Even though he logically knew that he must keep up the ruse of being Jack Collins, he was now insanely jealous of a dead man! The dead man who's life he had assumed. A man who, according to some emails that he had seen, was entirely unworthy of the woman who now lay asleep in Loki's arms. The woman at the hotel in New York was apparently only one of several women that Jack Collins had been entertaining outside of his marriage. More than jealousy, anger at the dead man now threatened to take over Loki's mind. It was not possible to kill the deceased, but Loki wondered if it was possible to resurrect him so that he would have the pleasure of wringing his neck...

No. Back to the matter at hand. Loki wanted Lauren to be his. Entirely his. He also wanted to avoid capture and imprisonment. Why should he be made to choose between the two? He decided then and there that he would not have to choose. Loki would win over Lauren for himself and accomplish what he had set out to do. It wasn't until the first gray light of dawn that Loki fell asleep, assured that he had come up with a plan to conquer Midgard and make Lauren his Queen. The children, while not his, would be no less loved because they were a part of Lauren, and he would do nothing to harm even a part of her. He plan to have it all.

For the first time in many years, Loki fell into a dreamless sleep. His sleep, however, was prematurely cut off by the sound of the bedroom door creaking open and the soft shuffling of little feet to his side of the bed. Olivia, her curly hair a mess, was dragging her stuffed bear by its arm. She rubbed one eye with her tiny fist as she yawned. "Daddy? Are you making breakfast?"
Chapter Summary

Oh my God! This story lives! I know, overall, where I want to go with the story. I have struggled with the details from Point A to Point B.

Anyway, Loki wakes up after his first night "home" and has to learn the ropes for domestic life. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Groggily, Loki rolled over and cracked open an eye. The little girl was now at the edge of the bed, her chin resting on both of her hands as she stood right next to his pillow. Her large hazel eyes showed that she was still somewhat sleepy. At first, he was startled that the girl had not reacted to seeing him as himself. Then, he remembered the night before. His spell applied not only to how Lauren saw him, but how anyone entering this room would see him. When he had a moment alone, he decided that he would have to enchant the entire house in such a way. Right now, he had to figure out how to get Olivia to leave the room so he could get dressed.

"Good morning, little one. Is your brother awake?"

Olivia shook her head "no," as she kept her head down by Loki's pillow. Her big eyes showing that she was now wide awake.

"Well, why don't you wake him and go downstairs? I will come down in a bit, alright?"

"Okay, Daddy." She turned and trotted through the bedroom, leaving the door wide open. Through the open door, Loki heard the door to Rylan's room open as Olivia's little voice chirped, "Rylan! Wake up!"

Based on the boy's response, Loki knew that Rylan had been sound asleep when Olivia entered his room and was less than enthusiastic about his sister waking him. He soon heard one pair of little feet scamper down the hallway and another shuffling along behind it.

Making sure that Lauren was still asleep and that no one was lurking in the hallway, Loki was able to magically dress himself in a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt from Jack's wardrobe. Rising from bed, he quietly made his way around to the other side. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Loki leaned over to place a soft kiss on Lauren's lips. Stirring under his touch, Lauren mumbled with her eyes closed and sleep still evident in her voice, "Good morning, honey."

"Good morning, darling. Olivia woke me to make breakfast."

"Well, honey, it is Sunday. You know the drill. Mommy's the short order cook Monday through Saturday. It's your turn to make breakfast."

Loki was about to protest, but Lauren opened one of her eyes. Loki knew that look. It was a look that Frigga had given him more than once when she wanted him to do something he detested. He had never had another woman direct this look toward him, but he suspected that it was universal in
its meaning. Resistance would be futile. With lingering kiss on Lauren's lips Loki said, "Alright, Lauren. I will take care of breakfast. See you downstairs."

She replied with a sleepy smile, "Thank you, Jack. I will be down soon."

He passed through the bedroom door and shifted into Jack. "Cooking for the children. Right. How hard could it be?"

Lauren rolled on to her back and stretched. Her body ached, but she was far from complaining. She really could not remember the last time that she and Jack had spent a night like that. It would have definitely been before the children came along, maybe even before they had been married. She wondered what really happened to him in New York. She would have to wait to talk to him about it, without the kids present. Whatever it was, Jack Collins returned home a changed man. Later, Lauren would wonder if these changes were here to stay. Right now, she needed to get up and moving.

When she made her way downstairs to the smells of breakfast, Lauren noted that it was also mingled with the smell of...burning? And why did she also smell wet dog? "Oh no," she muttered to herself. She quicken her pace as she rounded the end of the stairs and hasten down the hallway. She could hear the children giggling. The scene that greeted her in the kitchen was not what she expected.

The children were now happily eating breakfast at the table, but Lauren didn't recognize it as anything that was in Jack's usual repertoire. Whatever it was, was definitely not burnt as the odors in the room would indicate. He had his back to her, working at the stovetop, and to his right it appeared that every pan they owned (except the two on the stove) was in the sink with something burnt to it. "At least he opened the window over the sink to air out the kitchen," Lauren thought. Her eyes fell on the waffle iron. It, too, had not been spared from Jack's apparent issues with timing and temperature control. Why was there batter all over the counter? This struck Lauren as odd because waffles were Jack's go-to breakfast item. In fact, if he applied himself, Jack was usually the better breakfast cook.

A chorus of "Good morning, Mommy!" caused Lauren to look away from the devastation of the kitchen.

"Good morning, my little rabbits. What did Daddy make for breakfast?"

"Pancake balls, Mommy! Daddy made them with different stuff inside them," Rylan said.

"I really like the chocolate ones!" Olivia said as she had a piece on the end of her fork, oozing Nutella. Naturally, there seemed to be more on Olivia's face than anywhere else.

Lauren walked over to the stove and slipped her arms around Jack's waist, pressing her cheek to the spot between his shoulder blades. She breathed in, but quickly backed away. "Honey? Did you give the dog a bath?"

Jack chuckled as he said, "Yes, darling. Rocky decided to go for a walk in the woods and came back quite filthy. I changed my shirt, but I will need a shower."

She peered around Jack's shoulder to see him turning something with a skewer. Her brow wrinkled a bit as she tried to recall just where they had gotten this particular pan. Lauren couldn't recall using it. She then remember that it was a gift from her boss's wife, Marta. It had been buried in the back of the cupboard, since neither she nor Jack knew how to use it...or so she had thought.
When Loki came down the stairs, the children were already waiting at the small table in the kitchen. So was the dog. Rocky whined when he saw Loki and began to scratch at the door. Taking it as a sign that the dog need to go outside, Loki opened the door.

Loki immediately regretted this decision when Rocky spotted a gray squirrel and took off running. This would not have been bad in and of itself, but there was a steady, light rain which made the area beyond the lawn nice and muddy. The golden-furred dog came back to the door mottled shades of brown, tongue hanging out to the side with a doggie grin on his face. "Yes, just like Thor. Act now, think later," Loki thought as he caught the dog by the collar before he could run rampant through the house. He struggled to get the dog into the mudroom, where he found a large sink to wash the dog.

"Daddy, why are you giving Rocky a bath?" Rylan and Olivia were watching him. The sound of Rylan saying his name caused the dog to wag his tail vigorously, splashing water on the floor, on the wall, and on Loki.

Calling over his shoulder, Loki explained that he didn't want Rocky to track mud through "Mommy's nice, clean house."

He grabbed a large towel to lift the dog out of the sink. He set the Rocky on the floor and began to vigorously dry him, but Rocky had other ideas. Giving himself a good shake, Rocky's thick fur let lose a shower of dog-scented water, further drenching Loki and now getting the children wet. With the mudroom door ajar, Rocky bolted for the family room and began to frantically rolled on the rug. Loki was about to let loose a string of obscenities, now drenched and smelling of wet dog, but he heard the children giggling uncontrollably the dog's behavior. In spite of himself, Loki began to laughing too. He would just have to settle for changing his shirt for now. He would shower once he had the children settled with their breakfast.

He stood before the refrigerator, taking stock of its contents. He was surprised at how much he recognized, but was puzzled by others. There was a jar of some off-white, gelatinous substance in a jar. It was apparently called "Best Foods." It did not appear to be food of any sort, so how could it be the best? Humans were so odd.

"Can we have waffles? Please?" Rylan's little voice came from the small table behind him. Olivia was scrambling into her booster seat, next to her brother.

"Yay! Waffles! Waffles!" Olivia started chanting.

Loki took a deep breath. "Waffles. Right. I have seen them before. I have even eaten them. How hard can they be to make?" He began to rummage the cupboards for pantry ingredients and the utensils he would need to make them. Happily, his gaze turned upward toward an open shelf above the kitchen sink. There he found it full of cookbooks. His job just got a whole lot easier.

Twenty Minutes Later

Loki was at his wit's end. He had reasoned that cooking was simply potions, without the magic. Loki had mastered potions at a very young age, having demonstrated the patience and ability to improvise that was necessary to truly excel. By extension, he had assumed that he could handle cooking. He had never had to cook a full meal in his life. Being royalty had its privileges, after all. Even on hunting excursions or military campaigns, there was always somebody else to handle the food. He was by no means incompetent, but his culinary repertoire was limited.

His aptitude for potion-making had brought Frigga so much joy, since Loki had followed closely in
her footsteps. "If only Mother could see me now," Loki thought as he looked down at the front of his shirt. He then glared at the device on the counter that the children called the waffle iron. The recipe for batter had seemed simple enough. It wasn't until the batter had been ladled into small appliance that Loki realized that something had gone horribly, horribly awry.

It was subtle at first. As the batter warmed in the waffle iron, the lid began to lift. Loki pressed it back down as he walked by to start cooking the bacon he had found in the fridge. Rylan took care of feeding Rocky, then joined his sister at the table with a coloring book. The boy also turned on the television in the kitchen and turned it to something called the Disney channel so they could watch something called Mickey Mouse Clubhouse. At first, he watched the program with the children; it made him think of the books that he read as a child with their moving illustrations.

"Daddy! What's wrong with the waffles?"

Olivia's alarmed voice snapped him from the television screen. Turning to see that the batter had now bubbled and grown so much that the lid was almost completely open, Loki grabbed the nearest thing he could: the blunt knife sitting in the butter dish. He poked at the dough, hoping to pop it and get it to recede.

And pop it did.

The warmed, gooey batter exploded all over the countertop and hit Loki squarely in his torso. What remained in the waffle iron was burnt black and stuck to its iron plates. The children began to laugh hysterically at his misfortune. In spite of his scowl, the children kept on laughing. Meanwhile, Loki was going to find out why the recipe had failed utterly. He turned his attention to the recipe, he found it odd that a recipe this called for yeast. He flipped to the first page of the recipe and began to read through the ingredients..."No. Of all the ridiculous things!"

The pages in the cookbook had stuck together and what should have been the remainder of the waffles recipe turned out to be the second half of a recipe for cinnamon rolls. He was just about to start the batter over again, but the acrid odor of burning meat wafted toward him. The bacon was not merely burning. It was on fire!

Thinking quickly, Loki turned off the stove and slammed a lid over the top of the pan. He felt two pairs of eyes on his back. Turning slowly, he looked to the children. Their eyes were wide with horror. "Those were really big flames," Rylan said in awe. Olivia nodded mutely in agreement with her brother, her eyes still fixed on the covered pan as if it would re-ignite at any moment.

Loki took a deep, calming breath and exhaled slowly. "Alright, it looks like we will be having sausage, instead of bacon, with our breakfast."

With another clean shirt from the laundry basket atop the dryer, Loki took another crack at breakfast. His attempt at making pancakes was almost as abysmal as the waffles. The worst part is that he followed the recipe to the letter! He could not understand why the pancakes stuck to the pan. He went to flip the first batch but the cooked side of each pancake would not come loose from the pan. He thought that using the largest, heaviest pan in the kitchen would yield the best results. Even Volstagg could cook, for Norn's sake! He did everything that he had seen the rotund Asgardian do when preparing food in cast iron, so why wasn't this working?

Loki removed the now heavily battered skillet from the stove and went to retrieve yet another cooking vessel. He was met with the same results on another pan. He was about to pull yet another, smaller pan from the cupboard when he saw something way in the back that looked vaguely familiar. He reached back to grasp the handle and removed a round pan with seven large divots in it. He looked at the remaining pancake batter, then back at the odd pan. He laughed to
himself. "Now, this is something I recognize!" he thought before turning back toward the children.

"Have you two ever had ebelskivers?"

"What are apple-skeevers?" Olivia asked.

Loki chuckled at her pronunciation of the word. "Ebelskivers are like pancake balls. You can make them with fruit inside. Does Mommy have any fresh fruit?"

Rylan ran to the fridge and started pulling out every fruit to be found there. "Slow down, Rylan. Let's see what we have," Loki chuckled. He walked over to the counter to examine what the boy had taken out. There were several of berries and some apples.

"Perfect. Now I just need to find a skewer," Loki said as he started to search the drawers in the kitchen.

"You mean the marshmallow roasting sticks?" offered Rylan. The boy bounded to a drawer and pulled out some metal skewers.

"Thank you, Rylan. Now, watch."

The children pulled their chairs to stand next to Loki as he filled the divots in the pan with batter, then fruit. After topping them off with more batter, Loki loosened the edges with the skewer and started turning them. Olivia clapped her little hands in delight, "Cool! What else can we put in them?"

"We can make another batch. Right now, you need to go sit down so you can eat these first ones," Loki said as he shooed the children back to the table.

They were sitting, but still wriggling in their seats with anticipation when Loki brought the ebelskivers and sausage over to the table. He didn't realize what big appetites Midgardian children had. They polished off half of the sausage and the whole plate of berry-filled puffs. "Alright, what do you want next?"

"Apples and cinnamon," Rylan said.

"Bananas and Nutella," chimed Olivia.

By the time that Lauren came downstairs, he was already making Olivia's choice of bananas and Nutella. He had no idea what Nutella was, but it was all he could do to keep from eating it by the spoonful. Loki was rather pleased with himself at having remembered how to make ebelskivers. The last time he had made them, he was barely a teenager. Naturally, Loki had hidden his talent for making them from his brother and the Warriors Three. Otherwise, it would have been just one more "womanly" talent for which they could ridicule him. Since ebelskivers were the only thing that he could make for breakfast, Loki hoped that he wouldn't have to cook any other meals on his own. From here on out, he would watch Lauren to learn how to work in the kitchen.

Speaking of the lady of the house, Lauren looked beside herself at seeing the devastation he had wrought in the kitchen. However, her mood lightened a bit when she saw that the children were cheerfully eating. She was soon at his back, warmly embracing him from behind. Unfortunately, the mood was cut short by the scent of eau du chien that still lingered from Rocky's unscheduled bath. "Oh well," Loki thought as he tried to figure out how to navigate the uncharted waters of "the morning after."
Lauren looked over at the coffee pot. "No coffee this morning? I'm impressed. You're usually three cups in by the time you've fed the kids."

Jack glanced over at the empty vessel. "I'm sorry, darling. Between the dog running outside and my mishaps with the waffle iron, I didn't get a chance to put on the coffee."

"Oh, don't worry. I've got it. I was just concerned about you. You're usually a dangerous man to be around without his coffee." Lauren began to set the machine to brew enough coffee for her and Jack as she asked, "Where did you learn how to make ebelskivers? Marta gave us the pan after she and Howard had us over for brunch, remember?"

"That's right. I had almost forgotten," Loki replied in hopes that he could fake his way through the conversation.

Lauren gave him a sideways glance before saying, "I remember you and Howard having a big argument. When I brought that pan home, you were less than pleased to see it because it reminded you of that. That's why it's lived in the back of the cupboard since then."

Jack had just finished with the last batch of ebelskivers and turned off the stove. He gathered Lauren into his arms and rested his chin on top of her head. "I'm so sorry for my behavior, and if I embarrassed you, Lauren. I promise to do better."

"Jack Collins was not just a fool. He was a real prick," Loki thought to himself.

"Okay. This can't be my husband," thought Lauren. "Jack NEVER apologizes, especially when he's wrong." She made the mistake of breathing in deeply. As good as Jack smelled, the wet dog and burnt food odors still clung to him.

"Gah! Honey, I'm sorry, but you have to go get a shower after you eat," Lauren laughed.

The sat together and had breakfast. As if Jack's behavior wasn't strange enough, Lauren almost fell out of her chair when he asked what she wanted to do that day. Usually, Sundays were for getting housework done and prepping for the week. Maybe attending church on special occasions. Lauren and the kids would, anyway. Jack went reluctantly and with much grumbling. If they were home, Jack would hole up in his office or go watch whatever sporting event happened to be on TV.

"I-I don't know. It's been so long since we've done well, *anything*, together on a Sunday," Lauren said with uncertainty. It was almost as if she expected his offer to be conditional. It wasn't. Loki had every intention of doing whatever it was that Lauren wanted to do. Even if it was simply spending the day about the house.

He smiled at Lauren as he began to clear away the breakfast dishes, "I'll tell you what. You think about it, while I tidy up the kitchen."

Jack's face fell as he saw the havoc he had wrought. Lauren stood from her place at the table and patted him on the arm, "C'mon, Jack. I'll give you a hand with this. Then you can get cleaned up."

"I may need help with that too, darling," he replied with a wicked grin.

Lauren's eyes went wide, instantly thinking of the night before. She then cleared her throat and whispered, "Jack...young ears, remember?"

Jack glanced over at the children, who were sitting in the family room and watching more of their television program. He looked back at Lauren with a gleam in his eye. "Don't worry, Lauren. The children won't hear us if they are playing outside."
She didn't know what had gotten into Jack. Or her. But she couldn't stop herself from shouting into the family room, "Kids! Why don't you get dressed to go outside? It's too nice of a day for you to spend it indoors."

"Okay, Mamma. Are you and Daddy coming outside, too?"

"Daddy and I need to clean up the kitchen. Then we are going to go do something fun later. BUT, you have to be good and play nicely while you're outside," Lauren said.

Both children hopped to their feet and bolted upstairs. Once they were out of earshot, Lauren felt Jack's arms around her waist. He placed a heated kiss right behind her ear, then nibbled at her earlobe. This drew a shudder and soft moan from Lauren, who leaned into her husband. She felt the deep rumble of Jack's chuckle through her back as he whispered, "Now, now, darling. We still have a kitchen to clean."

Lauren turned to face him, with a lustful gleam in her eyes, "Well hurry up, dear. I don't want to be kept waiting."

She kissed the corner of his mouth then sauntered off toward the sink, her hips swaying as she did.

Loki cursed the fact that he couldn't just use any of his sorcery to clean up the mess and teleport them upstairs. If there were no children in the house, he would've stripped Lauren and had her on the kitchen counter right then and there. As it was, he worked furiously to help Lauren. From the corner of his eye, he caught Lauren watching him more than once with a sly smile on her face. "If she only knew," thought Loki as he put the last of the pans away and grabbed Lauren's hand. He practically ran up the stairs, Lauren running and laughing after him.

Chapter End Notes

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that "Loki vs The Waffle Iron" was inspired by one of my favorite Katherine Hepburn/Spencer Tracy movies, Woman of the Year.
As soon as they reached the master bedroom, Loki closed the door and locked it. There would be no pint-sized (or four-legged) interlopers, no matter how adorable they were. He had to suppress a sigh of relief as he shifted back to his Aesir form. "I will definitely be casting that spell on the rest of the house," he thought as he turned to see Lauren enter the bathroom.

He heard the sound of running water as he approached the doorway. Lauren was looking out into the backyard from the large window over the soak tub as she drew the shade. The scent of the bath oils met Loki's nostrils, mixing with the intoxicating scent of her. Her hair was still in a loose bun, the tendrils curling against her back of her elegant neck. Loki had already removed his shirt and was now standing behind Lauren. His fingers worked their way under the hem of her t-shirt, knuckles grazing the bare skin of her sides as he coaxed it over her head. She leaned into him with a contented sigh as he splayed one hand against her middle and used the other to tilt her face upward.

Once his lips met hers, Lauren's kisses went from warm to scorching. Her hand raked through his hair and her nails scratch at his scalp, just on the pleasant side of pain. If Loki had still been in Jack's form, he was sure the woman would have drawn blood. Following her lead, Loki fought to dominate their kissing. Soon it became a clashing of tongues and teeth, neither one willing to succumb to the other. He turned Lauren so that they were pressed together. Loki dipped Lauren, taking her off-balance and deepening his kiss. Lauren grasped his shoulders and moaned into his mouth, on the edge of swooning when Loki returned her to standing.

Lauren's body was thrumming with desire as she ran her flattened palms against the firm muscles of Jack's abdomen and chest. The pressure she applied with the heels of her palms caused Jack to close his eyes as he groaned. "Oh, Lauren. Who knew that breakfast could be so exhausting?"

Playfully smacking his chest, Lauren snorted with laughter. "I've known all along, Jack. I do it every morning but Sundays. Try making breakfast when you have a husband and two kids to hustle out the door to work and school."

Jack brought her hands up to his mouth and brushed her knuckles with his lips. "My darling, you are the real hero here. Now, let me take care of you," he said as he tugged on the drawstring of Lauren's flannel shorts. Standing on her tiptoes, Lauren shimmied out of them as Jack's hands pushed the waistband past her hips. Once they pooled around her ankles, his hands cupped her ass and pulled her closer. His mouth claimed hers once more; Lauren grinned against his lips at his sharp inhale when she snaked her hips to rub against the already straining erection which his pajama pants did nothing to conceal.

"Since when do you commando, Mr. Collins?"

Jack's voice dropped an octave as his fingers dipped between her slick folds and he replied over her keening, "Since my wife has turned out to be such a naughty minx."

Lauren's hands made quick work of removing the loose fitting pants before she reached over to turn off the tub's faucets. Loki capitalized on her distraction and scooped her up in his arms. She squealed when she was lifted off her feet and realized that he was carrying her into the tub with him. Loki slowly lowered himself into the steaming water, taking Lauren with him. They both moaned as they eased into the scented water. Grasping her by the hips, Loki situated Lauren so that she straddled his lap.
Gasping at the sensation of him prodding at her still sensitive entrance, Lauren eased herself down on top of him. Jack's mouth fell open with a pleasurable moan as his head rested against the edge of the tub. She spread her legs wider, working her way down his length until he was sheathed inside her completely. Being completely filled after feeling nothing but throbbing need took Lauren's breath away. She whimpered as she began to rock her hips against him.

His hands still on her hips, Loki slowed Lauren's movements as he whispered against her lips. "Take your time, darling. Take your pleasure from me."

As he guided her in deep, sinuous motions Lauren could feel the tension in her core increase to the point of being unbearable. Her breathing became shallow; she needed more and ground down against him. Anything to gain some relief from the overwhelming lust that had taken hold of her. Loki's hips thrust up into her, drawing a surprised cry from Lauren as she felt her body contract around him. She was so close. So very close...

Feeling Jack's thumb pressed against her swollen pearl made Lauren frantically ride his hand and cock as she came hard. Her cries were joined with his as she felt him swell and spend himself inside her. Lauren kept on rocking her hips as Jack thrust up into her, his lips latching on to her breast to suck hard on the tight peak. She clasped her hand to the back of his head as she rode out the last wave of pleasure that tore through her.

When Loki released her breast from his mouth, his vision was slightly blurred and he was panting. His eyes re-focused, his gaze meeting Lauren's. She was gulping for air as her turquoise eyes searched his. Her fingers ran from his cheeks to his temples, then through his hair. Closing his eyes and turning into her touch, he kissed the palm of her hand. She let her hand glide down his neck and chest, drawing a shiver from the man reclining beneath her.

He reached for the bottles at the edge of the tub; Lauren saw that Jack was trying to figure out which one to use. A small giggle escaped Lauren as she reached over to guide his hand to the shampoo before she removed her hair from its messy bun. She cupped her hands under the water so that she could wet her hair. She tried to take the shampoo from him, but he held it just out of her reach. "Oh no, darling. Let me," he squeezed a generous amount into his hand and began to work it through her hair. Lauren reveled in having her hair washed, her husband's firm hands massaging her scalp.

Loki felt himself harden at the sounds that Lauren made as he washed her hair. If she was going to make those noises, he would quickly lose control of himself. After carefully rinsing the soap from her long hair, he began to suds up the sponge resting on the edge of the tub. With long, smooth strokes Loki lathered Lauren's body, paying particular attention to her breasts. He abandoned the sponge in favor of his hands, teasing her still tight buds until she began to squirm. Those movements caused him to reflexively thrust into her.

As she gasped out her husband's name, Lauren felt herself being lifted from the tub. Water cascaded off their bodies and Lauren wrapped her legs and arms around Jack. They were dripping water all over the floor and Lauren was surprised that he had not slipped. He set her on the counter, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Lauren's hands scrambled for purchase on the vanity. She wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders while her other hand gripped the edge of the counter. His hands on her hips were the only thing preventing her from scooting back into the mirror behind her.

"Oh, Jack! I'm coming again!"

"Yes, Lauren! Come. With. Me!" Loki growled through gritted teeth as he emptied himself in Lauren. She wailed through her climax, clinging to him as she came. Loki held Lauren to him, her
face buried in his neck. "*She will be the end of me yet.*" Loki thought has he gently lifted the woman from the vanity. While his ultimate plan was to have Lauren at his side as his queen, Loki needed to focus. He could not have a queen if he was not a king, an issue to be rectified in the very near future. Still, there was nothing to be done that day. He would have to wait until he had some privacy to set his plan in motion. The situation would be delicate, but if there was one being capable of managing such things, it was Loki himself.

The rug under Jack's feet, sopping wet from the water that had run off their bodies, squished underfoot. Lauren laughed at this, which in turn made Jack laugh. "It seems that we just make a mess everywhere we go," Lauren said with a wink.

Jack's laugh rumbled in his chest. "But it is fun making messes with you, darling. It's even more fun cleaning them up."

After actually cleaning up (themselves and the bathroom), Loki and Lauren went back downstairs to fetch the kids from the backyard. Lauren had some errands to run in preparation for the coming work week, but she was also considering Jack's offer of a family day. She knew what the kids wanted to do; every since the weather had begun to warm up, Rylan and Olivia had been begging her and Jack to take them out on the water. It was still too cold for them to swim, but the kids loved being on the boat. Jack insisted on buying the boat and keeping at the marina in near Ballard. To Lauren, it had been an extravagance when Jack could barely make time to do things like show up to Rylan's games or Livie's dance recitals. However, it was something Lauren relented on, in the hopes that they could spend more time as a family. Those hopes were dashed with the knowledge that the boat had been taken out maybe ten times. Seven of those ten trips had been "boys trips," disguised as "team building" for work.

Cautiously, Lauren regarded her husband. "If the weather stays nice this afternoon, perhaps we can take the kids fishing? We haven't taken the boat out at all since October and Rylan is eager to use the pole that my dad gave him for his birthday."

Loki remembered the boy's mention of wanting to go fishing. He had not thought to make it a family affair, since such endeavors in his youth were undertaken with Odin and Thor. The apprehension in Lauren's eyes nearly broke Loki's heart. She was bracing herself for a negative response. Tamping down his ire at further evidence of Jack Collins' woeful inadequacy as a man, Loki arranged Jack's features in a warm smile. "That is a great idea! Let's get the children so that we can take care of your errands first."

"Oh? You want to go into town with the kids and me?"

Loki mulled it over. Have some time alone in the house would allow him to ward it and cast the spell he needed to be able to wander about freely as himself. Still, he felt an unexpected pang of guilt at the idea of not being with Lauren and the children. She could see him struggling to make a decision. Lauren wrapped her arms around his waist and peered up at his face with a gentle smile. "I'll tell you what: I will take the kids with me to run errands. You can stay here and put together a cooler to take on the boat. Maybe make some sandwiches? That way, when we come back, we just have to unload groceries and head to the marina."

"That is an excellent idea, darling. You won't be long?"

Lauren shook her head. "No, just a grocery run and to get Rylan a new pair of boots and some jeans before we go to see my parents. That boy is growing like a weed!"

Jack smiled down at her and kissed her lips. "Then I will take care of things here. Hurry back."
Standing on the porch Loki, in Jack's form, waved as Lauren maneuvered her vehicle to head down to the main road. Olivia was in the back seat and had rolled down her window to enthusiastically wave back at him, "Bye, Daddy!"

"Bye, sweetheart! Be good for your mother," he called back to her.

As the silver-gray SUV turned toward town and disappeared into the trees, Loki entered the house and locked the door behind him. Shifting into his own form, he stretched and cracked his neck. Waving his hand toward the windows, he simultaneously closed the blinds; it wouldn't do to have anyone passing by see what he was about to do. Summoning his magic, a swirl of green and gold mist swept throughout the house, running up the walls and resting over the windows and exterior doorways before seeping outside. He felt it stretching out and over the exterior of the house and down to the fence line and edges of the property. The mist solidified to a fiery mesh. In a sudden flash, the mesh vanished from sight. The spell was now complete and Loki was able to roam freely about the place without detection. He would also know when anyone entered the property, distinguishing visitors from Lauren and the children.

Rocky, who had been laying in the hallway warily watching him, cocked his head to the side with a small whine. Loki looked at the dog with an arched eyebrow and said, "No, your former master will not be returning. I am sorry."

Resting his head on his paws, the dog huffed out a disheartened sigh. Walking over to the downcast canine, Loki knelt to scratch his ears. "You knew I was not he when I arrived, yet you did not betray me. You know that I mean your family no harm. I will need you to look after them when I am gone."

Rocky lifted his head, emitting a soft growl. Loki replied in a stern voice, "None of that now. I have no intention of abandoning them, but there will be times when I cannot be here. Do you understand?"

The dog grumbled to himself, lowering his head but keeping his eyes upward to look at Loki. With a nod, Loki stood and said, "Good boy."

Having reached an understanding with the only creature in the house to know who he was, Loki strode toward the kitchen to begin assembling everything he needed to take to the lake. Having the house to himself and magic at his disposal, he avoided a repeat of the Breakfast Debacle. He located an ice chest in the garage and filled it with cans of soda and beer from the fridge that was also located in the garage. Loki removed the phone from his pocket to text Lauren to request ice...then remembered that he didn't need to. With a wave of his hand, he conjured a block of it then broke it into pieces, the ice falling neatly into the ice chest. Assembling sandwiches and packaging them neatly, along with other snacks took no time at all. With all of this accomplished, Loki found himself wandering to Jack's office upstairs.

Rocky padded up the stairs after him, settling onto the worn couch under the window. As he booted up Jack's laptop, Loki gave the dog a reproving look. "Rocky, are you allowed up on the furniture?"

The dog's answer was to groan and roll over onto his back, exposing his belly to the sunshine streaming through the window. Loki chuckled, "Fine. I won't tell if you won't."

Loki began evaluating Jack Collins financial situation, which was more than comfortable. His wealth was analogous to that of an Asgardian baron, albeit a lesser baron in some far-flung colony. Still, it was more than Loki had anticipated. Not only was the man a founding partner of a prestigious corporate law firm, he also had amassed great wealth through a series of investments.
Some of these investments piqued Loki's interest; they made money year after year and also seemed to be a bit...unconventional. He made note of these for further research. What's more, Lauren's contribution to the household income was also considerable. She was employed by a Stark Industries subsidiary, a private aircraft designer and manufacturer based in Seattle. "That may be useful. I can parlay that into a way meet Lauren as myself. I should be able to also monitor Stark's activities from afar," Loki thought. "Then again, I don't have to. I have to meet that insufferable piece of human detritus later this week."

Preparing to dive in to possible locations for his base of operations, Loki felt the presence of Lauren and the children entering the driveway. Loki saved his work and powered off the computer. There would be time to sort this out later. Right now, he needed to get downstairs and get ready for their day trip.

"Son, you won't catch anything if you don't keep the bait in the water," Jack chuckled at Rylan as he reeled in his tackle for probably the fifteenth time since they drop anchor in the cove. Loki was grateful to find that piloting the Boston Whaler moored at the marina was no different than piloting some of the watercraft he had used on Vanaheim and Alfheim. This wasn't his first time fishing, either. It was, however, the first time in centuries since he had been fishing on Midgard. The old man behind the counter at the marina's bait shop had been especially chatty and freely gave advice as to which fish were biting and what bait to use. Rylan had wrinkled his freckled nose at using nightcrawlers, but Loki wasn't the least bit squeamish about using live bait. The boy, after watching him bait his hook, bravely picked a worm out of Styrofoam container filled with damp soil and put it on the hook. Now, they sat watching their lines for any sign of fish.

Lauren had been duly impressed with the fact that Jack had assembled everything and came bounding down the porch steps to help unload the car. Now, she watched over the top of her magazine as he patiently showed Rylan how to cast his line, right after he untangled the line on Olivia's Minnie Mouse fishing pole. While Livie wasn't actually set up with hook and bait (she only had a bobber on her line), she still wanted to "fish" like her daddy and big brother. Seeing her boys in matching baseball caps, the big one drinking a beer while the little one sipped his root beer to mimic his daddy, made her hear swell with pride and love for her little family. Lauren's reverie was interrupted by her son's jubilant shout, "Dad! I've got one!"

"Set the hook, Rylan! Like I showed you. That's it! Let me get the net. Keep the pole up, and keep reeling him in!"

The boat rocked with the commotion as Jack reached over to grab the net. Lauren grabbed Livie and pulled her into her lap to keep her out of the way as the boys worked to get the fish onboard. Rylan kept reeling and Jack shouted encouragement as he leaned overboard with the net, his eyes following the line as it zigged and zagged. The fish broke the water's surface, its scales flashing in the afternoon sun. "Whoa! Look at that!" the boy shouted as he leaned back to keep the pole upright. The drag on the reel zipped as the fish continued its struggles and ducked under the boat. Loki looked over to see the boy laboring to keep the line tight. Dropping the net, he swooped behind Rylan and grabbed the pole. "Let me help you, son. Let the fish tire himself out. As soon as you feel any slack, reel it in."

Three minutes later, Loki couldn't tell who was more tired: Rylan or the sockeye salmon that he had caught. Lauren had the camera ready for when he had hauled it onto the boat and hooked a finger through its gills. He and the boy posed for a picture with the fish, which was almost half as long as Rylan's height. "Can we cook him for dinner tonight, daddy?"

Jack laughed, "Well, we have to clean him for your mother first. This is a lot of fish for one meal,
so let's just get him cleaned and cut up before we decide what to do with him, alright?"

They wrapped the fish and put him in the empty cooler just as Loki saw his own fishing pole bend sharply. Handing Rylan the net, Loki said, "Here, hang on to that until I need it!"

Lauren was now recording video of Jack angling his catch toward the boat. For as much fight as Rylan's salmon had put up, this one felt as if it was Jormurgand on the other end! Loki smiled ruefully, remembering the last time he had gone fishing that big, muscle-headed oaf brother of his. He was loathe to admit it, but part of him actually missed Thor and imagined that he would be having fun right now. The fish gave a mighty tug at the line, almost ripping the pole from Loki's hands. He let the line play out then brought the fish in closer. The fish leapt into the air, almost slacking the line and dropping the hook. This one was a monster!

Finally getting the fish close enough to reach it with the net, Loki took it from Rylan so he could lift his catch into the boat. It thrashed about on the deck, angrily slapping its tail in tangle of net and fishing line. Lauren and the children were cheering and clapping as he looked up; his mortal form was slightly winded and sweating under his arms after that battle. "'Jack' is going to get whipped into shape," Loki thought as he rested his hands on his knees. He looked forward to doffing this mortal form sooner rather than later.

"Jack, honey, I think we have enough fish to last us a while," Lauren beamed at him.

Nodding his head and adjusting the hat that Lauren had insisted he wear as soon as they embarked on the boat, he agreed. "What do we want to do now? Do we want to go for a ride, or head home?"

"Go for a ride!" the children shouted.

"Alright, let me bring in the anchor and everyone take their seats."

"Faster, Daddy! Faster!" the kids squealed as Loki opened the throttle. The water was surprisingly calm, but there was enough chop to keep him from wanting to run wide out. The kids were laughing as the wind whipped Olivia's hair away from her face. Rylan, like Loki, had turned his cap backward so that it wouldn't fly off his head. Lauren held on to her sunhat for dear life, even with the chin strap snugged tight. The shoreline flew by in a blur of green blobs for trees and gray, rock-strewn beaches. Aside from a few cargo ships and some commercial fishing boats, the water was open before them. "If they are having this much fun, just wait until they go to Asgard," Loki grinned to himself as he thought of the flying skiffs that he was so fond of racing.

The harbor patrolman gave him a dirty look as he slowed the engine and coasted into the area where signs on buoys indicated that the speed limit was 25 miles per hour. This look didn't lead to anything, but it still gave Loki some pause. The last thing he wanted was to draw unwanted attention. He pulled into their slip at the marina, the boat coming to a stop along the dock with a soft bump. Once it was tied off, Lauren leapt onto the dock to take the children from Loki. Between him and Lauren, they got the kids and their things back to their vehicle with no trouble. The children fell asleep on the car ride home, their soft snoring causing Loki to look in the rearview mirror at them.

"The fresh air and excitement did them in," Lauren said as she patted the hand that was resting on the center console.

Taking her hand and kissing it, Loki grinned at her. "Then we shall have to do that more often, darling."
She cocked an eyebrow at him, "They may be a bit grumpy when we get home, hun. They don't like to be woken up and we still have to feed them dinner and bathe them."

Sighing at Lauren's terribly sensible observation, Loki gave her hand a squeeze. "Don't worry, Lauren. I will take care of bath time, if you want to handle dinner."

"You will handle bath time? What are you going to do?"

The grin returned to his face, "I have a plan. Never fear, Lauren."

The tub was filled with bubbles and floating bath toys. Lauren had been correct that the kids would be less than pleased to wake up once they got home. After they were awake enough to come out of the car, Loki got them excited about the idea of him managing bath time. Rylan had been easy, being old enough to take care of himself for the most part. After checking to make sure that he had rinsed all the soap from his hair, Loki helped him out of the tub.

Olivia, on the other hand, needed some coaxing. It wasn't until Loki had filled the tub with her special Frozen bubble bath (and maybe cast a spell to make sure that the bubbles stayed), that Olivia was willing to be lifted into the tub. He was now kneeling on the floor, making a bubble beard and a bubble hat for Olivia. She took a handful of suds and made a beard on his face, giggling the whole time. Loki didn't dare wipe it off. That is how Lauren found them when she came to see if he needed help after she got dinner in the oven.

"Darling, do I have something on my face?" he asked with a cheeky grin.

Lauren giggled herself, sounding for all the world like the adult version of Olivia, as she leaned in for a kiss. When she pulled away, she had bubbles on her face too. "Thank you, Jack. I can take it from here. Dinner will be done soon."

Loki went to quickly wash and change his own clothes before returning downstairs. As he was passing the bathroom door he heard the little girl ask, "Mommy, can we go on the boat again with Daddy?"

"Of course we can, sweetie. Did you have fun today?"

The little girl nodded, "Oh yes, Mommy. I want to catch a fish next time."

Lauren pulled Olivia's PJs on and started brushing her hair. "You will have to ask Daddy if it's alright."

"Why wouldn't it be alright? Of course, Olivia can fish next time." The little girl's eyes lit up as she ran to wrap his leg in a hug.

"Thank you, Daddy! I want to catch a big one!"

He picked her up and began to carry her downstairs. "Of course, sweetheart. I'll make sure that you catch a big fish. We will have to get you a bigger pole, though. We don't want to break your pretty Minnie Mouse one."

Dinner was a full of chatter, but the children were fading fast and soon it was bedtime. They were out as soon as their heads hit their pillows. Taking Jack's hand, Lauren led him down the hall to their bedroom, softly shutting the door.
Happy New Year!

I hope that you all had a very merry Christmas. Work (and life in general) decided to get uncharacteristically busy for me for the last month of the year. I have had chapter drafts languishing and begging to be posted.

Thank you all for your patience! Now, on with the story!

Loki began to stir on his own as daylight slowly crept from behind the blinds that covered the windows. Nuzzling Lauren's neck, he pulled her against him. The last several days had surprised him. Not only had he fallen easily into some semblance of domestic life, but he also adapted to fatherhood in a way that he would not have believed possible. His thoughts, however, were torn asunder by the loud alarm that sounded from his bedside table. "I suppose I must report to Jack's office," Loki thought as he reached over to turn off the alarm.

Not ready to leave bed just yet, Loki rolled back over to snuggle closer to Lauren. There was a soft hitch in her breathing as he pressed a kiss to the crook of her neck, followed by a sleepy mumble. "I heard your alarm, honey. Are you getting up?"

"Mmm. Maybe. Maybe not."

Rolling over to face him, Lauren caressed his cheek. "I know you don't want to, but if you don't go in today you'll be kicking yourself the rest of the week as you try to play catch up."

Humming in reluctant agreement as he kissed her lips, Loki then wrapped his arms around Lauren. "You are far too sensible for your own good, Lauren."

"Aw, I know. Adulting is hard, Jack," she replied in a teasing voice.

"Are you mocking me, darling? You really shouldn't mock the man who knows your weaknesses," in a playfully serious tone.

Lauren giggle at him, "I'll have to take my chances."

She squealed when Jack began to tickle her. Lauren's shrieking laughter turned to loud moans as he went from tickling to caressing, then kissing, then nipping and licking his way down until he came to rest between her thighs.

"Jack," Lauren gasped, "you have to get ready for work."

He grinned at her, "But I am, darling. I can't possibly leave you in such a state all day, now can I?"

"What about the kids?" she whispered anxiously.

His grin got more devilish as he replied, "Then I guess you will have to be quiet."
Jack flattened his tongue against Lauren, swiping up the length of her drenched folds. He flicked the tip of his tongue against her swollen pearl, drawing a cry from her that he was surprised hadn't disturbed the children's slumber. Slowly circling her clit, Loki could feel her essence coating his mouth and chin. As he tasted her arousal building, he felt his cock throb just on the other side of painful. He had not planned this at all, but Lauren was intoxicating to him. He removed his mouth from her folds.

"Oh, you tease! You can't leave me li-OH HOLY FUCK!" Lauren's cries of frustration became ecstatic as Loki drove himself home in one smooth thrust. Where his previous lovemaking had been gently dominant, he needed to come. Right. Now. Knowing how close Lauren was already, the pulsating heat of her channel confirming it, Loki's thrusts became erratic with his own orgasm building.

As her body convulsed around him, Loki filled her with a guttural moan. Collapsing over her, resting his weight on his forearms, Loki grinned at her and said, "Good morning, darling."

"Yes, it is," Lauren replied with panting breath, pulling him down into a languid kiss.

They showered together, something that was usually reserved for child-free vacations. Lauren was waiting for the other shoe to drop: waiting for things to go back to the way they had been before Jack's trip to New York. She didn't want to jinx it or ruin Jack's good mood, though. He was usually so grumpy in the morning; Lauren decided to simply enjoy him be so attentive and lovey.

As they showered together, Jack insisted on washing her. He pouted a bit when Lauren insisted that he needed to "actually wash her," rather than disguising foreplay as helping her.

His pout turned into one of his irresistible grins as he replied, "Well, you can't blame a man for trying."

Loki didn't want to go anywhere, but he had to begin the process of getting Jack Collins' affairs in order and securing his own means of providing for Lauren and her children. To do so, he needed to have unfettered access to Jack's business files a great deal of privacy. Sure, he could remotely access the files via Jack's laptop. However, the possibility of Lauren wandering in and out of the home office would greatly increase his risk of being discovered. "No," Loki thought, "I need to make a showing at the office. It would look suspicious for Jack to become a recluse before he meets his untimely, but convenient, demise."

Selecting a charcoal pinstripe suit from Jack's wardrobe, he went about choosing a shirt and tie. Once dressed he stood before the mirror, alternating between an evergreen tie with subtle stripes and a blue paisley tie. Lauren looked up from slipping on the nude patent leather pumps she had chosen to go with her burgundy pencil skirt and cream-colored blouse. "I really like the green one, honey. It brings out your eyes."

Looking at her in the mirror's reflection, Loki smiled at her with Jack's face. "Then I will just have to wear the green one," he said.

Lauren stepped up to his side to give him a peck on the cheek. "I'll see you downstairs," she said as she patted him on the ass.

He grinned to himself, tying the tie, as he heard Lauren rouse the children from bed to get them ready for the day. There was some minor grumbling, but a called-out warning from him to "Listen to your mother" was enough to get the troops mobilized. Soon, the sounds of running water from the hall bathroom and the patter of little feet let Loki know that he had done his part.

A quick detour into the home office allowed him to secure Jack's laptop. Passing the children's
rooms, Loki bid them a good morning. He was met with calls of "Good morning, Daddy!" while the children were donning the clothes that Lauren had apparently laid out for them. Loki assumed that Rocky was downstairs, having followed Lauren down to the kitchen to be let outside and fed. Praying to whatever deities might be listening, Loki hoped that Rocky didn't require any bathing this morning.

Loki was relieved to see Rocky calmly crunching on his kibble; the dog greeted him with a snort and a tail-wag. "Well, at least you didn't go chasing any squirrels this morning," Loki said.

Lauren giggled. "Jack, we've been over this. You have to hold Rocky back when you open the door. That way, you make enough ruckus for the woodland critters to know that he's on his way out. If they aren't in the yard, Rocky won't chase them. Out of sight, out of mind."

Loki took the proffered cup of coffee, giving Lauren a kiss on the forehead. "Of course, darling. I forgot yesterday, hence Rocky's impromptu walk in the woods."

Lauren beamed up at him as she walked to the foot of the stairs. "Kids! Come on down if you want to eat breakfast. Otherwise, we're going to be late!"

She had barely re-entered the kitchen when they came pounding down the stairs, both children jumping from the second to the last step to land hard on the wood floor. Olivia was wearing a pink and green plaid shirt with jeans, while Rylan was wearing a pale blue button-up shirt, a red tie, and dark blue pants. While Rylan already had his hair combed, Livie's hair was wild. Both kids took up their spots at the table while Lauren set out bowls of cereal for them and toasted bagels for her and Jack. Amidst the crunching of cereal, the children talked about school. Loki could practically feel Rylan's excitement at almost being done with school for the year. Olivia was excited, too, because it meant that she and Rylan would be able to spend time together while at something called "summer camp."

Before the kids could flee the kitchen, Lauren grabbed a brush and hair tie from the bathroom next to the mudroom. "Wait just a minute. Rylan, let me look at your hair. Olivia, I still need to do yours."

"Mommy, I want to wear my hair down!"

"Not today, Livie. You look like a wild child with your hair sticking up everywhere this morning."

"Can I have pigtails, then?"

"There's no time this morning, sweetie. Tomorrow morning, I'll give you pigtails," Lauren said as she began to brush out her daughter's unruly hair and inspect her son's.

Lauren reached over to straighten Rylan's part before she started to braid Olivia's hair. Loki, meanwhile, watched as Lauren made quick work of the girl's hairstyle. The woman gently took her time to disentangle knots in the girl's soft, curly hair. It reminded him of the many times that Frigga had to tame Thor's, or his own, hair. Of course, those times often involved removing some unpleasant substance from their locks, in addition to brushing it. Loki smirked a bit as he recalled the time that one of his pranks resulted in Thor being covered head to toe with pine sap, needles, and bits of bark. He had to hide his smirk when he caught Lauren side-eye him; Loki arranged Jack's features into one of feigned innocence as he took a sip of his coffee.

The girl was a bundle of energy, squirming in her seat, but she stayed still enough for Lauren to put her hair in a single braid that ended just below the girl's shoulders. "There. All done. Now scoot," Lauren said as she patted her daughter on the rear and directed her toward the nook where the
children's book bags and shoes were waiting. Rylan had already donned his shoes and a jacket that matched his pants.

"Jack, I have to prep for Thursday so would you mind taking Rylan to baseball practice?"

Loki recalled seeing something of this Midgardian sport, and the boy's participation in it, but nothing to indicate where it was played. Jack's face must have betrayed this. "Will that be a problem?" she asked cautiously.

"Oh no, darling. No problem at all. What time will that be?"

Shaking her head with a faint smile, she replied, "Practice starts at 4:00. Same as it always does. They have a game tomorrow, the last one of the season. Will you be able to make it?"

"Of course!" he said without hesitation. "I will make sure that I'm there."

Rylan, overhearing this, beamed up at him. "You promise? You're going to be there?"

The joy and hope in the boy's eyes filled Loki with an emotion he had not felt in centuries. It was the feeling of knowing complete trust, and it made him slightly uncomfortable. Shoving that feeling aside, Loki smiled down at the boy he said, "Yes, son. I promise."

"Welcome back, Mr. Collins!" called out the ebullient, and rather busty, blonde seated behind the desk. He had barely been two steps in the building, and hoping that he could go unnoticed for a bit while familiarizing himself with the office's layout, but no such luck.

"Er, thank you..." Loki glanced at the placard on the desk "Tiffany. Has Chester already arrived?"

Tiffany gave him a funny look. "Mr. Collins, you know Chester doesn't come in before 9:00. But I will tell him that you're looking for him."

"No need. I will find him when he comes in. Thank you, Tiffany." Before Tiffany could say anything further, Loki strode across the reception area to the elevator bank. He assumed that, as a partner, he would have an office on a higher floor. The doors to the elevator were closing when he heard a cultured, feminine, voice shout, "Hold the lift!"

Obliging the disembodied voice, Loki cursed his luck. The owner of said voice stepped on to the elevator; it was a darker skinned woman, rather tall for a Midgardian, with black hair in short tight curls, full lips, and almond-shaped eyes the color of amber. Loki watched as the woman in question gave "Jack" an appraising look up and down, her eyes lingering on the front of his trousers a bit longer than decorum would dictate.

When her gaze finally wandered up to his eyes, the woman gave him a smile that spoke of more than a passing familiarity. "Jack, I'm glad to see that you survived New York. Of course, you wouldn't have been hurt at all if you would have come away with me on a mini-break, but I understand you not wanting the little woman at home to find out."

While Jack's only reaction was to raise an eyebrow, Loki's temper (which was always simmering below the surface) was threatening to unleash a volcanic eruption of cataclysmic proportions. This woman was evidently a work colleague of Jack's...and yet another conquest. Instead of unleashing all of his fury upon the detestable creature accompanying him on the elevator, he smiled and chucked her under chin as he leaned forward. In as soft and threatening a tone as he could manage with Jack's voice, Loki replied, "Whatever may have been between us is over. Our interactions will be nothing short of professional and you will not breathe a word of it to a single soul. Have I
made myself clear?"

Rather than staying appropriately frightened, the woman sneered up at him. The elevator had stopped and, before the doors could open, Loki straightened up and stepped back from her. Another dark skinned woman (this one demurely dressed and bespectacled) boarded. "Good morning, Ms. Gordon. Mr. Collins, it's good to see you back in one piece. Chester said that you were right in the thick of things."

Loki evaluated this new passenger. Her smile was shy, but genuine. While the woman now identified as Ms. Gordon had the look of boundless ambition and the willingness to achieve success by hook or by crook, this young one seemed to be one of those strange creatures who actually put the needs of others ahead of her own. Knowing that she was close enough with Chester to speak with him outside of work, Loki decided that he would have to learn more about this one.

"We are all glad to see Jack's return, Tricia. Now, how is the research going for the Stark case?"

The girl was clearly made nervous by the older woman, as she stumbled over her words. With another ding, the elevator stopped to disgorge some of its passengers. Tricia and Ms. Gordon got off while a bald, slightly overweight man (who's bearing reminded Loki of Odin just a bit) got on. The older man nodded to both women, "Alexis. Tricia."

"Mr. Stiles," both women said as they acknowledged his greeting. Loki looked past the man to see Alexis smirk as the elevator doors shut. Loki knew he would have to deal with her more completely. At the moment, though, he needed to focus on Nicholas Stiles, one of his fellow partners. "How was your weekend, Nick?"

"Fine, Jack. Just fine. Let's have a look at you, lad," the older man turned Jack's head this way and that to survey the cuts and bruising still present on his face.

With a grin, the old man clapped him on the shoulder. "I've always said you were one lucky bastard. Nice to see your luck still holding out. No doubt Lauren and the kids were anxious to see you."

"Yes, they were. We spent the weekend at home mostly. Took the boat out on Sunday to go fishing."

"Without the usual suspects? I was beginning to wonder if that boat of yours was just a floating man-cave. I'm glad to hear that you're using it with the family, too." The elevator stopped and Loki followed the man out. He paused in the small lobby, debating on which office was his, when he heard the crisp tones of an older woman's voice calling his name. "Jack, I already have your coffee at your desk, and I pulled the files you will need to review before your 10:30."

A tiny, but formidable, woman in a trim black pantsuit with silvery hair piled atop her head stepped out of the doorway to his left. "Well? Are you just going to loiter out here? I know that your name's on the building, but you've got to do something billable today. Or did you hit your head in New York?"

As he stepped up to the pixie-like woman (whom he assumed was Jack's assistant Vera), her sharp gaze and sardonic smile morph into a look of shock and embarrassment. "Oh, Jack, I'm so sorry! You really did get banged up, didn't you? C'mon, I'll get you something for that bruise on your cheek. It won't make it go away, but it should help fade it a bit."

From what he had read in Jack's emails, Vera could be a real dragon. Then again, she was the gatekeeper to one of the three founding partners of the firm. She had to know how to scare off
lesser beings to keep Jack from getting distracted. Loki suspected that he and Vera would get along just fine. He let Vera slather a gel on his cheek, which he suspected contained arnica given its smell. Not that it would do anything to him; the bruises and cuts were all cosmetic. His actual wounds from his battle with Thor and that big green brute had healed within days. Loki shook his head. He was going to focus on other things, like reviewing the files prior to meeting with a new client from Latveria who was attempting to purchase several American companies.

"That was exhausting," Loki thought to himself as he slid into the seat of Jack's car. Between Jack's work and the tasks that he had set for himself, Loki had a busy day of it. This Latverian client was going to be tricky, but not impossible. In fact, much of what he researched for the client suited his own purposes. He also spent the better part of the afternoon reviewing the Stark case with Chester and Tricia. Naturally, Alexis was there (Loki figured out that Tricia was part of her junior staff) and made it her business to show off for Jack and make thinly veiled comments. Chester and Tricia exchanged more than one eye roll. He'd have to get the two of them on their own to glean any useful information about his newest nuisance.

He checked the time; he would make it to Rylan's school with only a few minutes to spare. Thankfully, Lauren had texted him while he was trapped in an interminable meeting with Neil (one of the newer partners), Alexis, and Nick. When he began to gather his things and rose to leave the room, all eyes turned to him with curiosity.

"I have to take my son to baseball practice today. Lauren is busy the next few days."

"Baseball practice?" Alexis said with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, Alexis. Baseball. You know, the sport they play with bats and gloves? And running around a diamond, though how they came up with the idea of calling it a diamond escapes me."

Nick chuckled a bit as Alexis glowered at Jack. Neil just looked confused as to why Jack would be leaving now when they had yet to get to the best part of the meeting. No one said a word against it when Nick just waved Jack out of the room with a promise to see him bright and early the next day.

Pulling up to the curb outside of the school, Loki spied Rylan walking across the yard. From the boy's downtrodden pace, Loki knew something was wrong. Overriding his instincts to climb out of the vehicle and rush to the boy's side, he allowed Rylan to come to the passenger side. "Rylan? How was school today?"

When the boy lifted his head, Loki could see his eyes were red from crying. He knew that the boy was tender-hearted, based on his interactions with his sister and mother. Loki also suspected that softness would also make him an easy target for other, rougher boys. "Son? Are you alright?"

The boy looked down at his hands and mumbled, "Do I have to go to baseball practice today, Daddy?"

"Now, what's changed your mind since this morning?"

The boy turned his sad eyes to look at his father. "Ben Whitmore. He's been mean to me all season. Today at lunch, he said that I shouldn't bother coming since I get struck out every time I'm at bat. He said because his dad's the coach, he's going to make sure I'm warming the bench at tomorrow's game."

Loki was no stranger to being put down and made to feel inadequate. Especially when he was
compared to his Asgardian ideal of a bro- adopted brother. He bloody well wasn't going to let anyone make this sweet boy feel that way!

"Oh, did he now? Well, I will let you in on a little secret: boys like Ben have to put others down to feel better about themselves. If you try your hardest and do your best, that's all anyone can ask from you. I know that you will do great, but you have to practice. Right?"

Rylan gave his dad a little smile and nodded. Loki reached over and ruffled the boy's hair and said, "I will be there at practice, watching you. Maybe I can help you after we have dinner with your mother and sister?"

The boy's smile broaden. "I'd like that! Thank you, Daddy."

Loki had to fight the smirk that threatened Jack's features as he drove them toward the park. There were any number of ways in which one could deal with a bully. Of course, the fact that this particular bully was seven or eight years old meant that Loki would have to exercise some restraint. Still, he had to admit that watching a bully get his comeuppance was one of his favorite pastimes.
Loki had been thinking during the drive from the school to park. The name Whitmore sounded familiar. Not from his failed invasion or any of the numerous henchmen that Barton had been so resourceful to gather for him while under the Scepter's influence. No. Loki had heard and seen that name elsewhere...

Lauren truly had it all down to a science! Before he departed for the office, she made sure that Loki took Rylan's duffle bag with his baseball gear. The boy jogged over to the public restrooms so that he could change out of his school uniform. Waiting for the boy to come out, Loki surveyed the rest of the people gathered in the bleachers and at the chain-link fence. There were definitely more children than adults. Of the adults, he noted a disproportionate number of them were women. Loki wondered at this; his assumption was that recreational sports on Midgard was a sort of replacement for combat. Still physical, still competitive...but lacking the real, lasting consequences of warfare. As such a substitute, he assumed that the fathers of these children would take a more active role in seeing them participate. Midgardians were, indeed, a curious bunch.

He spied two men inside the fenced area, chatting with some of the boys and looking at their clipboards. "Those must be the coaches. Now, which one is the elder Whitmore?"

Loki had no sooner asked the question than he saw one of the men with an ill-favored look about him began to blow on the whistle hanging around his neck. In spite of his enthusiasm for giving orders, the man looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here. "Ah, there he is. It appears the apple did not fall far from the tree."

Rylan emerged from the restrooms, tossing the bag to Loki without breaking stride, and tugging his cap onto his head. "Thanks, Daddy!" the boy shouted over his shoulder as he scurried over to his teammates.

"Collins, hustle up! Practice is starting now, not when you decide to join us," Whitmore said loud enough for everyone to hear.

Loki bristled at the boy being singled out in such a way. He stalked over to were a smaller group of men and women were chatting, next to the fence. Although he could feel the eyes of these bystanders on him, he focused his attention on Whitmore. Willing the detestable man to look up, Loki got his wish. Whitmore's gaze fell on Jack Collins, and his face broke into an insincere display of enthusiasm. "Jack! Long time, no see! I would have thought you'd be busy trying to prepare your case against my client."

"Ah," thought Loki, "and that is how I recognize the name. This man is Adam Whitmore, the attorney representing Justin Hammer. The coward! Rather than keeping it between the men, he's decided to bring the children into this. No wonder his son believes that strength is preying upon the weak."

Loki wasn't about to let the opportunity for a little gamesmanship pass him by. With the best show of gentility that he could muster in Jack's form, Loki walked right on to the field. He was aware that his attire and height made him stand out even more in comparison to the uniformed youngsters and the two shorter men. With a wide grin on his face, he extended his hand in greeting to Whitmore, "Now, Adam. Surely you can agree that it is in poor taste to discuss business matters right now."

As he took Jack's hand, the shorter man let out a derisive snort. "Sure, Jack. Whatever you say.
You're the one who's always 'on' and never lets a chance to have fun get in the way of work."

Whitmore winced as Loki squeezed his hand a bit harder and used his thumb to apply pressure to
the inside of other man's wrist. Leaning down so that only Whitmore could hear him, Loki/Jack
growled, "I mean it. If you have an issue with me, fine. But if you drag my son into this, I will
have your head on a pike."

The man's panic-stricken face and slightly paler features revealed all that Loki needed to confirm
that his assumptions were correct. Straightening up, Loki clapped the other man on the shoulder
with his free hand and grinned, "Good. I'm glad that we've come to an understanding."

Loki turned heel, wishing that he was able to actually wear his cape (purely for dramatic effect),
and strode off the field to take his place standing on the other side of the fence by the dugout. He
could feel the stares of the other parents and couldn't blame their curiosity at the exchange that had
just taken place. Loki may have chuckled just a bit whenever he saw Adam flex his right hand,
periodically clinching and opening his fist.

Slipping behind the bleachers, away from prying eyes, Loki shifted into his own form and cloaked
himself so that he could watch the practice, undisturbed. From what he saw, Rylan was not the
fastest runner. Nor did he have the strongest throw. However, the boy played with heart and was
good at catching the ball. When it was Rylan's turn at bat, one of the larger boys (who turned out
to be none other than Ben Whitmore) started heckling him. "Better bring it in," he shouted to the
outfielders. "Collins is at bat so it won't go far."

Loki used this to his advantage. The boy was too busy taunting Rylan to pay attention to anything
else. Reaching out with his magic, Loki untied the bigger boy's cleats. Then tied the cleats
together. The pitcher threw the ball, Rylan got a piece of it with his bat...and the ball made a
beeline for Ben, who was on first base. Not ready for the ball to fly his way, Ben got hit in the
shoulder.

All hell broke loose. The bigger boy threw down his glove and charged at Rylan. He only made it
two steps before being tripped up. Ben face-planted in the dirt, while Rylan ran passed him to first
base. With everything still in disarray, Rylan kept on running and stopped at second. Loki, now
visible and back in Jack's form, rounded the corner just in time to see Adam pick up his son and
begin to scold Rylan.

"Whitmore! Are you really trying to blame my son for your kid's clumsiness? He literally tripped
over his own feet," Loki shouted with Jack's voice.

"Your kid beamed mine with the ball!"

"Yes, he did. Because your son is too busy not paying attention. Maybe, if he was focused on the
game and not on other things, he would've caught the ball with his glove instead."

Other parents were nodding in agreement with Jack, but none their spots. Rylan was trying to get
his dad's attention, shaking his head with fear in his eyes. Loki gave the boy a reassuring wink,
which seemed to calm him. Adam blustered at the taller man, trying to refute his argument. All he
could come up with was, "Well, it's still a foul ball. Rylan needs to go back to bat."

Loki was about to continue arguing when he saw Rylan trotting back to home plate. With a parting
glare, Loki walked back to take his place by the fence. Stopping in front of Rylan, he patted him
on the shoulder. "You hit it once already. You can hit again, son. Just relax and swing through
the ball, alright?"
Rylan looked up at him with his big aqua-colored eyes and nodded. "Okay, Daddy."

Loki resumed his own form and hiding spot behind the bleachers, this time he enchanted the bat before showing himself as Jack again. The boy checked his feet and posture before nodding to the pitcher. Rylan swung and connected again. This time, the ball went straight for the outfield and past the players. It bounced to a stop next to the fence while Rylan kept on running the bases. His teammates, and now the other parents, were cheering him on. He had a huge grin on his face as he made it to the plate.

Shortly after, practice was over. Rylan's elation had not dissipated, even during the whole drive home. Loki couldn't help but share the boy's smiles. "You did very well, Rylan. Do you still want to practice a bit after dinner?"

"I want to show Momma! I've never hit the ball like that before!"

"Alright, then. We can show your mother later."

Rylan ran into the house, calling to his mother. Loki heard him enthusiastically tell her about his home run...and about how Daddy got into a fight with the coach.

"Did he now?" Lauren gave Loki a look that was a mixture of reproach and pride. She looked down at the boy and told him to go wash up for dinner. Turning to her husband, and checking to see that young ears weren't present, she said in a hushed voice, "So what did that pompous ass do?"

Loki laughed outright at this. "Don't laugh! Tell me! I know he's been chomping at the bit to get under your skin. He knows the only way he can win his case is to make you look like a hothead. So what happened?"

Loki then told her about how downtrodden Rylan was after school, about his brief encounter with Adam (omitting the part where he almost broke the man's hand), and about Rylan's turn at bat (also omitting how young Whitmore's laces got tied together). When he was done, Lauren gave him a full, lingering kiss. "I'm sorry I missed all of that, but I am so glad that you were there."

Her eyes clouded a bit with anger (which surprised Loki a bit) as she said, "However, that man has gone too far if he's encouraging his son to pick on ours! Of course, it doesn't surprise me. Birds of a feather flock together, and his client is just as big a bully as he is."

Loki placed a kiss on her forehead, then looked down at Lauren. "Don't worry, darling. Men like Adam Whitmore always get what's coming to them."

Lauren giggled, "Since when have you become a philosopher, Jack?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he replied, "Let's just say that near-death experiences have a way of reframing one's priorities. Right now, I don't want to spend anymore time talking about that boorish excuse for a man. Dinner smells amazing, and I plan to enjoy it with you and the children."

As they sat down to dinner, Lauren watched as Jack and the kids talked about their day. Olivia showed her dad the drawings that she did in daycare and Rylan talked about his science class. They were learning about solar system. Jack sat with rapt attention as Rylan talked about the different planets and how stars were made. She wasn't sure, but Lauren thought that Jack's eyes got a little misty when the boy mentioned how their teacher even told them about the things that people were learning with the discovery that aliens really did exist and how some aliens, like Thor, traveled through space.
She and Jack were clearing the dishes when the phone rang. Checking the caller ID, Lauren saw that it was from her parents' house. "Hello, Momma. How are you and Daddy doing?"

She looked apologetically at Jack, who just waved her off. Lauren gave him a puzzled look when he indicated that he would finish dishes, while she spoke with her mother. Lauren was in the family room, sitting in the reading nook, while the children watched cartoons. Loki lingered on just the other side of the doorway as he overheard Lauren's side of the conversation.

"Momma, I'm telling you that Jack's a different man. Ever since his trip to New York...Yes, Momma I know, but...No, this is different. Please, Momma? You'll see what I mean when we come in a few weeks. Alright, Momma. Give our love to Daddy. Love you, too. G'night."

As soon as he heard her hang up the phone, Loki walked in to join her. He had just seated himself in the empty armchair when Lauren arranged herself in his lap. Raising an eyebrow, Loki was just about to ask what she was doing when she leaned in for a kiss. "Darling," he whispered as he nipped at her earlobe, "the children are just over there."

"I'm just showing a little of my appreciation for you finishing the dishes," Lauren purred before kissing his jaw.

"And taking Rylan to practice," her lips brushed against his neck below his ear.

"And I'll be able to show you more later," she whispered as she began to slide from his lap. Once her feet hit the floor, though, Lauren found herself off-balance and falling back into Jack's lap. An arm around her waist and a hand on the back of her neck pulled her into his embrace and a heated kiss. Lauren was nearly lost in it, when she heard giggling behind her.

Looking into each other's eyes, then turning toward the couch, Lauren and Jack saw both children with their hands over their eyes and giggling. Loosening his grip on Lauren's waist, Loki allowed her to stand as he said in a mockingly stern tone, "Alright, you two. That's enough. Rylan, let's go outside so you can show your mother how well you can hit the ball."

The next morning when Loki arrived at the office, he was the only one there. Lauren had been puzzled by his waking earlier than usual, but dozed back to sleep when he explained that he had work to do so that he could leave in time to attend Rylan's game. He took care of tending to Rocky (without squirrel chases), made coffee, and (on a whim) laid out everything for Lauren and the children to have breakfast.

He sat down to his desk when he received a text message from Lauren: Thank you for making coffee, honey. And setting up breakfast :-) He responded: You're welcome, darling. I will see you later this afternoon.

As he logged on to his computer, his phone buzzed again. Yes, you will. Love you <3 He had just finished typing out Love you, too when Jack's inbox finished populating with incoming email. Loki was aware of the mobile phone's ability to receive electronic missives; however, when Loki was done working for the day, he was done working. Period. Hence, why he now had twenty unread emails on his screen. Several of them were marked urgent and sent after 7:00 PM. One had come from Adam Whitmore and was copied to "tstark@starkindustries.com", "nstiles@chslaw.com", "sharper@chslaw.com". The subject line read "Unprofessional Behavior."

Loki leaned back in his chair and read Whitmore's diatribe, which was little more than his belly-aching over the events of the previous afternoon, with a little embellishment thrown in for good
measure. The blathering idiot had the audacity to say that Loki's behavior was "unprofessional, unethical, and uncalled for." Loki chuckled as he read the responses from both Nick Stiles and Stuart Harper. Not only did both men summarily tell Whitmore to quit whining, they also threatened to bring him before the state bar's disciplinary board for his attempted harassment. The last email came from none other than Tony Stark, labeled "Attorney-Client Privilege." It simply read:

"Collins, I will pay you double your billing rate if you'll punch Whitmore in the mouth. Triple if I can watch. If you happen to also punch his client, I might have to give you a private island in the Caribbean. Just putting that out there."

He chuckled to himself. A private island fortress was appealing, but Stark's offer was in the wrong part of the planet for Loki's taste. He was tempted to reply to the email, asking that it be an island in a cooler climate. Loki was certain that such an offer would be rescinded if Stark knew that "Jack Collins" was none other than the God of Mischief. No, Loki would stick to his original plan.

Figuring that he still had another hour or two before anyone else came to the office, he got to work enchanting his office in the same manner as his home. Then he went about the more mundane task of setting up a new client file.

Loki went down his checklist: Articles of Incorporation? Filed, and awaiting approval. Funding? Directly transferred from one of the accounts that was in Jack Collins' name only. Loki would, over the next several weeks, begin to close these accounts and roll them up under the corporation he was setting up. He looked into Jack's life insurance policies and decided to increase coverage so that when he decided it was time for "Jack" to go, Lauren and the children would be able to live in modest luxury for, what Loki hoped, was a brief mourning period. He figured that three months ought to do it. Three months before he could actually court Lauren as himself.

Himself. Now, that was the tricky part. He would have to carefully introduce himself to Lauren. Not as Loki of Asgard, invader of Earth. He quickly realized, the longer his spent time among Midgardians, that he did not have to wage war on Earth in order to conquer it. In fact, bloodshed would be wasteful! Much had changed from the time of his youthful adventures with Thor and his companions on Midgard. It was more prevalent for men to battle each other in the boardroom and the floors of stock exchanges than it was for them to meet in an open field or arena. Pens and keystrokes replaces swords and combat sorcery. Rather than taking an enemy's life, one took his clientele...or his sources of capital.

Upon further research into Jack Collins' investment choices, it appeared that Jack was a naughty (albeit unimaginative) boy. A little embezzlement here. A bit of insider trading there. All done without his wife's knowledge, of course. Loki had no doubt that she would have been horrified to learn that her husband had been busy lining his own pocket to finance a double-life. The late Mr. Collins appeared to lack the fortitude and vision necessary to turn a small fortune into a dragon's hoard. Luckily for him, Loki didn't suffer from that problem. Once all of the accounts were in order, Loki would begin to make the necessary arrangements.

"Well, you're here awfully early," a sultry voice purred from the doorway to his office. Loki looked up from his computer screens to see Alexis' figure silhouetted against the daylight pouring in through the glass wall in the lobby outside of his office.

Without being invited, the woman entered Jack's office and shut the door behind her. With an exaggerated sway of her hips, she sashayed over to his desk. If Loki hadn't been so annoyed by the interruption, he would have laughed at her pathetic attempt at seduction. Even in this mortal form, Loki would've been able to tell that the woman was sans panties. As himself, Loki noted that she positively reeked of arousal and desperation. Coming from Lauren, Loki would have lost control...
of himself. Hell, coming from any other being, Loki would have been sorely tempted. Coming from this woman? It nauseated him.

She took a seat on the edge of the desk with her legs spread wide, rather than sitting with her legs demurely crossed, and hitched up her skirt to reveal that she was, indeed, without undergarments.

"Like anything you see, sir?" the woman said as she looked at him in a way that she must have thought alluring.

Pushing himself away from the desk, Loki's disinterested gaze made it apparent that he did not. The woman, however, was not taking "no" for an answer. "You know that I can ruin you, Jack. The emails, the text messages, the photos? Not to mention the credit card statements for dinners, drinks...overnight stays in hotels. Oh dear, what would Lauren say if an unmarked envelope was to find its way to her desk?"

It is now that Loki couldn't help but let a little of himself shine through. He had been waiting for this confrontation ever since the previous morning. Waiting, and preparing.

"You would truly be a marvel if you could produce such a thing, since they do not exist," he replied with a triumphant smirk.

Alexis smugly produced her mobile phone as she stood and began to tap and scroll. Her expression fell. Smugness was replaced with bewilderment and rage. "How? How did you do this?" she hissed.

"Ah, therein lies the trick. If you plan to blackmail someone, Ms. Gordon, you have to be able to anticipate how they will react. That way," he continued in a patronizing tone, "you can prevent them from doing something stupid to jeopardize your plans. Now, get out of my office, you contemptible guttersnipe."

Hellfire and indignation smoldered in her features as she spun on her heel to storm out of the room. Before she reached the door, Loki had to get in one last dig. "By the by, just what were you hoping to gain? Surely it wasn't love, Ms. Gordon."

The woman faced him with her grip upon the edge of the door, knuckles turning pale. "You said it yourself, Jack. The quickest way for anyone to get ahead is to fuck their way to the top. I planned to fuck you, one way or the other."

She slammed the door shut, rattling the artwork and picture frames on their nails. Loki, for his part, contemplated her words. The more he learned of Jack Collins, the less he enjoyed walking around in his shoes. The only thing that kept him from unceremoniously ending the charade was the devastation it would cause Lauren and the children. Up until his death allowed Loki to assume his identity, it appeared that Jack Collins led an ignoble life. As long as he needed the man's identity, Loki plan to do all that he could to shield his little family for the truth. As the rest of the office came to life, Loki steeled himself for another day.
Breaking Bread with the Enemy

Chapter Notes

A little plot here. A lot of fluff there. All for a reason.

All over the city, contractors' clean-up crews had been working 'round the clock. Three shifts a day, ten hours to a shift. Under normal circumstances, two hours of crew overlap would have been deemed wasteful. However, when you're cleaning up rubble and wreckage from an alien attack on a major metropolis...well, there wasn't much precedence for such a thing on Earth. George Barnes wasn't about to complain, though. He was grateful for the work. And the overtime. The increase in pay was only for the short-term, but he knew that it was enough to help he and his wife get caught up on their bills, maybe put away some money for their retirement and for their young children.

George wasn't doing much but operating the smart end of a shovel. Again, he wasn't about to complain about getting to work a job that didn't require much thought and that constituted a full workout (buh-bye gym membership!). The one downside of the job: George was prone to letting his mind wander. His mind wandering meant that he missed out on some major shit. Today's major shit was about to slap him in the face. Or, more accurately, hit his nose.

George's crew had been sent to clear debris from an alleyway between two post-war skyscrapers. This area had not taken too much damage, but there was still enough to keep them busy for the rest of the afternoon. When they arrived, everyone had commented on the obvious funk in the alley. Now, he was dealing with the olfactory of a nuclear strike. Dropping the shovel, he stumbled away to gag, wretch, and completely lose his lunch. His fellow laborers soon followed suit, everyone rushing for the end of the alley for the fresher air of the vehicular exhaust-spewing thoroughfare.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, a very sallow George Barnes keyed up his radio. "Dispatch, we've found another body. Better call the coroner. It looks like another John Doe."

When Stark's entourage (which included Lauren) and the legal team assembled for this meeting and seated at the conference table, Jack made a valiant effort to be situated next to his wife. It was only when Lauren had placed a delicate hand over the protective one on her knee that her husband had relented in his uncharacteristically possessive behavior. The boss' boss, who always saw ev-er-y-thing, just had to make some crack.

"Hey, I can't blame the guy! If I had a hot wife, I would want to sit next to her all the time, too." Tony Stark offered his hand to Jack Collins as he spoke. Jack took it with a wary eye, but Tony kept on grinning as he continued, "Don't worry, Jack. I'll take good care of her while I'm here."

That was bad enough, without Stark winking at Jack. That one gesture was enough to make Jack apoplectic. "Jesus Christ," Lauren thought. "Stark suffers from diarrhea of the mouth and constipation of the brain!" Now she had to focus on her job AND calming down her irate husband.

It was a miracle that Loki had not completely lost his composure upon meeting Tony Stark in his current circumstances. It was bad enough that he vividly remembered the metal man's smug
countenance from the Battle of New York, as the Midgardians now referred to it. He knew the man to be a rake (Barton was quite the talker while under the Scepter's influence), but Stark's behavior toward Lauren was inexcusable. The not so furtive glances at Lauren and the way that Stark's eyes came to rest a bit too long on her backside while she was walking at the head of the group made Loki want to personally remove the man's eyeballs from his skull.

The final straw was when Stark boldly took Lauren's hand and pressed a lingering kiss to her knuckles at the meeting's conclusion. Loki's vision literally turned red as he focused all of his ire on the shorter, dark-haired man. Without even thinking, he cleared the distance between in two steps. It wasn't until he felt himself begin to lose control of his shapeshifting, and hearing Lauren's voice, that Loki realized he had grabbed a fistful of Stark's clothing.

"What has gotten in to you?" Lauren hissed through clenched teeth, shooting an annoyed look at her husband. She must have imagined it, but Lauren thought that Jack's eyes flashed a vibrant green, then red. Even when she verified that she was looking at her husband's hazel eyes, they still looked as if a stranger was peering back at her.

Tony Stark's face was one of perfect astonishment as Jack Collins released his grip and smoothed the lapel on his jacket. Jack clinched his jaw as he backed away. Lauren could hear him grinding his teeth as he did. Her husband's voice growled, "This man has been shamelessly flirting with you the entire time he's been here. What's more, he's doing it in front of me!"

"We've been through this before, Jack. Stark doesn't mean anything by it. If anything, he's doing it to screw with you."

The man in question stepped forward with his palms facing them in surrender. "Easy there, big guy! I didn't think you would be so touchy about it. I mean, you're wife is hot as hell and probably has men flirting with her all the time. Thought you'd be used to it by now. Look, let me make it up to you both. Pepper is coming in to town this evening, so let's make it a double date. Dinner's on me."

Taking hold of his hand, Lauren gave it a tight squeeze as she cast a warning look at her husband. She turned to back to Tony and replied, "We would be delighted. We just need to find a sitter for the kids, after our son's baseball game."

"Oh! Don't worry about it. I have someone who just loves kids that would be glad to look after them while we go out to dinner."

Tony excused himself to make a few calls. Loki turned to Lauren, "Are you certain that this is a good idea? Do we really want to leave the children in the company of a stranger?"

"Honey, it's probably one of Stark's bodyguards. If it makes you feel any better, we can ask to meet him beforehand," Lauren said as she pressed a kiss to his cheek.

A protest was just on the tip of Loki's tongue when Tony returned. "Good news, he's on his way. So, what's good to eat out in Redmond? I still don't understand why you don't live closer to the city, a great looking couple like you." Loki continued to mentally rant as Lauren and Stark ironed out the details for their evening out. Before he could even say a word, they had already made arrangements for Stark and his lady friend to come to the house in their car...along with their ad hoc babysitter.

Stark and the rest of his team had exited the room, leaving Lauren and Jack behind. She wore a saccharine smile, but had brimstone burning in her eyes. "Jack," she said a warning tone, "Be. Nice."
Loki deeply inhaled, through nostrils not his own before replying, "I shall do my best, dearest."

Her shoulders slumped a bit before she pressed a tender kiss to his lips. Whispering against his lips, Lauren pleaded with him. "I am sorry that Tony is such a pain in the ass. He does things just to get a rise out of people. If you don't react, he will leave you alone...eventually."

Jack's hazel eyes softened as he looked down at Lauren. She continued to speak with him. "You have nothing, and I do mean nothing, to be jealous of here. I wouldn't touch Tony Stark with a ten-and-half foot pole."

Jack threw his head back and laughed before weaving his fingers into Lauren's hair to draw her close. "Oh, darling. I trust that you have infinitely better taste than that! I just cannot abide any man imposing on you in such a manner."

"Well, his is imposing on us for dinner this evening. At least Pepper is with him. She seems pleasant enough."

He hummed an acknowledgement against Lauren's lips. "I will see you at Rylan's game, darling."

Rylan was on cloud nine when he mother hustled him through the door, trailing behind him with his sister in tow. The boy had not only caught the ball twice, he scored a double and a triple when he was at bat. Loki was even prouder: not one ounce of seidr was used to aid the boy. As he had suspected, Rylan was more than capable. He just needed the confidence to do so. His performance at the previous day's practice was all the boost he needed.

"Go change out of your uniform, hun. Daddy and I are going out to dinner tonight, so we're ordering pizza for you kids and the sitter," Lauren said as the kids trotted upstairs.

"Is Liz coming to watch us, Momma?" Loki chuckled at the boy's hopeful tone. He had no clue who "Liz" was, but he knew puppy love when he saw it.

He and Lauren exchanged a look as she answered the boy's question. "No, sweetie. It's a school night, so Liz can't come. Mr. Stark is bringing someone to watch you and Livie."

"Oh," Rylan said, not bothering to hide his disappointment.

Lauren couldn't help grin at the twinkle in her husband's eye. "Don't laugh too hard, Jack. I have it on good authority that you had a crush on your babysitter when you were his age. In fact, I seem to remember hearing that you would fake being scared of the dark so you could sit on the couch with her when your parents went out."

Gathering his fiery red-head in his arms, Loki continued to chuckle. Even if he didn't know the specifics of Lauren was talking about, he did recall a few of his mother's ladies in waiting who were kind to him as a boy...and one in particular with whom he was infatuated. That infatuation continued well into adolescence. Unfortunately for Loki, she was married off to a governor of one of Asgard's colonies. Last he had heard, she was the mother of four children and was adored by her husband. Come to think of it, she too, had hair the color of a blazing fire...

Lauren clearing her throat brought his attention back to the matter at hand: they had to get ready for the onslaught of an evening with Tony Stark.

Under the guise of needing to compose some emails, Loki followed Lauren upstairs and entered Jack's home office while she went to shower and change. Loki was, in fact, checking the progress of setting up his own identity. He had created a backstory suitable for his purposes: a wealthy
foreigner of vaguely Scandinavian origins seeking to develop his business interests abroad. With the aid of none other than Collins, Harper, & Stiles. To further facilitate these ends, he also planned to purchase a private aircraft from the company for which Lauren worked. Not all of these could be done at once: Loki knew that he had to develop a sufficient backstory and paper trail so as not to rouse suspicion. Deciding that nothing further could be done today, Loki made his way to the master suite to change his own attire after securing the office door.

Lauren was well on her way to getting ready for an evening out. Dressed in a simple, but elegant, floral print dress, she bent over and flipped her hair so that she could dry it with a handheld device that shot hot air with the aid of a built-in fan. It seemed horribly inconvenient, but Loki was grateful for the opportunity it gave him. He was busy admiring her from the back, unaware that Lauren knew of his presence.

He was fantasizing about how she would look in that position, without her clothes, when she busted him. "Jack! You need to quit staring at my ass and get dressed, honey."

"I will quit staring when it quits being so alluring, which will never happen," he grinned as he shed Jack's work attire in favor of something a bit more in keeping with their plans. Lauren had even laid out his clothes for him: a dark blue cashmere sweater, charcoal jacket, and dark washed jeans.

She watched him through the reflection in the mirror as she applied her makeup. Once he pulled the sweater down over his muscular torso, Jack gave her a wink and a knowing smirk. "Now who's staring?"

Lauren quickly averted her eyes to continue getting ready when the doorbell chimed. "Jack, that would be Tony and Pepper. Would you please let them in? And Jack? Please, please, be civil."

He stepped behind her, arms wrapping around her waist and hands running down the front of her hips as pulled her against him. Kissing the back of her neck, Loki smiled against her skin as he felt the tremor up the woman's spine. "For you darling, I would ride through the very gates of Hell."

Lauren closed her eyes and swayed a bit. "I'll remember you said that later when you're cussing the fact that Tony Stark is sitting across the table from you."

Talk about killing the mood! If she had an inkling as to who he really was, the only thing that would do the job more effectively was the mention of his bro- Thor. Or Odin. Loki suppressed an involuntary shudder and backed away from her and retreated from the room. As his steps brought him closer to facing Stark without Lauren's supervision, Loki steeled himself for the inevitable unpleasantness. He planned to turn his attentions to Stark's companion, who he recalled as having a modicum of tact.

Loki opened the doors grant their guests entrance to their home.

Stark had indeed brought his lady friend, Virginia Potts, and another man that he seemed to recall having the ironic moniker of "Happy" Hogan. Mustering all of the social graces that his mother had imparted to him, Loki stood aside and gestured for the party to enter the house.

The children, hearing the front door open, came bounding out of the family room. "Daddy! Who is it?" Rylan asked with Olivia hot on his heels.

"Oh, look! It's the munchkins," Tony smirked as he looked down at the approaching children. Whatever shyness the children had evaporated once they saw Iron Man standing in the foyer. The children, without prompting, introduced themselves and even shook hands with the adults. Pepper smiled as she said, "Your kids are so well-behaved! Then again, I shouldn't expect anything less
"Speaking of the lady of the house, here she is!" Tony exclaimed. Loki's eyes drifted to the staircase were Lauren stood, beaming with pride at hearing Ms. Potts' compliment.

Pepper intercepted Tony, extending her hand to Lauren and making the necessary introductions. "Don't worry about a thing, Lauren. Happy will be just fine with the kids for a few hours, won't you?"

"Sure thing, Pepper. If they're this nice all the time, we should get along just fine," Happy replied.

Giving the man a wary look, Loki turned back to children. Lowering himself to their level he gave each a hug and a kiss, reminding them to "listen to Mr. Hogan." Lauren did the same, in addition to letting Happy know that pizzas had been ordered and for him to help himself to any other snacks he might want. While the man wasn't exactly smiling, he seemed a bit more at ease than when he first entered the house.

"So, how long have you two been married?"

Loki was about to answer when Lauren placed a hand on his knee and gave it a light squeeze. "Eight years. Sorry to interrupt, but Jack is awful with remembering birthdays and anniversaries. At least his assistant keeps him caught up."

Taking her hand in his, Loki raised it to his lips and kissed the back of Lauren's hand as he gave her a wink. It had been made apparent to Loki that Tony Stark did not often interact with the members of this part of his business empire. Over drinks and appetizers, Tony had asked all manner of questions of Lauren about the work done in their facilities across the Pacific Northwest. He was surprised to learn that Lauren, in fact, was in charge of the development of the next generation of private jets, from their architecture to the cabin interiors. When she pointed out that his own jet had recently been upgraded, Stark turned to Pepper.

"When did that happen?" Tony asked with surprise evident on his face.

Pepper smiled indulgently at him as she spoke, "The jet was delivered to Santa Monica three months ago. You have yet to fly in it, since you've been using your suit to get around."

"That's right," he answered her with a peck on the cheek. "Do you like it? If you want anything different, you're sitting right across from the woman to get it done."

"Tony!" the strawberry blonde exclaimed as she smacked his arm. "I'm so sorry," Pepper apologized profusely to Lauren. "It's lovely, really. There isn't a thing that I would change about it. In fact, I'm impressed that you have a fully functional galley."

It didn't pass Loki's notice as Lauren beamed with pride. "Actually, I think my crowning achievement was the fully functional office. From behind that desk, Tony can run his entire company and no one would know that he's in the air."

"Personally," Stark interjected, "I was a little disappointed that the upgrade before this had 86'ed my in-flight dance club."

"You mean 'strip club',' both women said in unison.

Looking from one to the other, then to Jack, Tony ruefully said, "It's just awful when a woman knows you so well, right Jack?"
"Oh, I don't know," he drawled as he turned to Lauren with a twinkle in his eye. "There's something to be said for being with someone that knows exactly what you like."

Lauren blushed from his comment, but her eyes soon took on the same look. Tony and Pepper didn't miss the exchange. Pepper had the good manners to not say anything. Tony was about to say something, but was rescued by the arrival of their entrees.

Dinner continued on to dessert and soon wound down. Miraculously, Loki didn't want to murder Tony. He found his manner brash, but beyond the bravado Loki saw that man was genuinely appreciative of the people in his employ. As they were leaving the restaurant, Pepper turned to Tony. "I haven't heard anything from Happy since he texted to say the pizzas had arrived. Do you think he's alright?"

"Aw, he's just fine. He's probably having the time of his life."

Rocky was the only one to greet the returning couples as they entered the house. Loki could hear the sounds of music and singing from the family room (some song about life being better under the sea)...and the unmistakable sounds of a grown man snoring. The women started giggling, but Tony motioned for them to keep quiet as he crept after Loki. The room was illuminated only by the glow of the television and the dancing (swimming?) and singing sea creatures swirling about a mermaid. In the soft glow of the screen they saw Happy Hogan, head of security for Stark Industries, wearing a pink feather boa, a glittery crown fitted with colorful plastic jewels, and a child on either side. Both children were also asleep; Rylan in his cowboy pajamas with a gladiator's helmet on his head and Olivia wearing a silver tiara, bright blue tule skirt over her own PJs, and a scepter topped with a star clutched in her little hand.

"Oh this is too good!" Tony whispered to Loki as he pulled out his phone. Loki couldn't help but chuckle as Stark snapped away, taking pictures of Hogan and the children. Peering into the room, Lauren cooed at the sight.

"Tony, that is just too cute! You have to send us those pictures...and Happy's contact info so we can use him as a sitter again."

Stark grinned at them, "You bet! Next time, I might have to bring back up. Maybe Captain America ought to get a taste of what's it's like to hang out with the munchkins?"

"Baby steps, Tony. Steve is still getting used to the modern world," Pepper replied.

Loki and Lauren each took a child in their arms before Tony shook his bodyguard awake. Happy woke with a start, the crown sliding off his head and stopping at the tip of his nose. Looking about him to get his bearings, Happy's eyes focused on Tony's face.

"Where are the kids?"

"Their parents have carried them upstairs."

"Oh," Happy's hands fell on the boa. Looking up at Tony with a skeptical eye he asked, "There aren't any pictures of this, right?"

"Happy, what sort of boss do you think I am?"

The larger man groaned as he extracted himself from the couch. "The sort that would take pictures and plaster them all over Facebook."
"Me? No! Happy, I would never post something like this on Facebook," Tony said. "The company intranet, though? Absolutely!" he thought as he uploaded the photos.

Loki was helping Lauren tuck the children into bed when he felt a bit of mischief brewing. Grinning to himself, he could only imagine Hogan's reaction to what Stark had done. He returned downstairs with Lauren to bid Stark and company a good night. Once they were safely on their way down the road, Loki hastened Lauren up the stairs. She struggled to keep her giggles and footsteps quiet as they made their way down the hall and shut the door behind them.

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